



Cookbooks are meant to be used, dirtied, loved.

The Cookbook Caper

The making—and ‘ruining’—of a family cookbook

MARY ELLEN MCGINTY COLLINS

My family’s best memories revolve around my mother’s cooking prowess, so I decided to give my sisters and brother a collection of Mom’s signature recipes for Christmas a few years ago. In an uncharacteristic attempt to keep things simple, I planned to assemble our top 12 favorites in practical three-ring binders.

But then my usually project-averse husband, John, picked up an illustrated, spiral-bound restaurant menu one day and said, “It would be cool to do your mother’s recipes like this.”

Two weeks later, he had another brainstorm: “It would be really cool if you made the food and then I photographed it.” That did it. We both leapt into Project Cookbook.

Beginning in April, we spent every weekend cooking, baking, and photographing. I taught myself graphic design and hunted for illustrations that fit my 50s theme, and quotes

that fit Mom. We scoured antique stores to find familiar kitchen items that added authenticity to our photo-shoots, and John spent hours glued to Photoshop.

I already had all of the recipes I needed, except the one for fruitcake, so I let Mom in on the secret—partway. I stayed mum about the cookbook and told her I was going to surprise Carol, Susan, and Kevin

with a collection of neatly typed recipes.

“That’s great,” she said. “I’ve been wanting to get rid of some old cookbooks. I’ll just tear out the recipes and send them to you. I assume you want the ones for applesauce and jelly and all of the canned things.”

Uh, sure. “Absolutely! That would be wonderful!”

I already had one of Mom’s fruitcakes in the freezer, so all we had to do was thaw and photograph it. But to avoid having to give myself a crash course in canning to get pictures for these new additions, I told another little lie.

“By the way, we’re fresh out of 14-day pickles and applesauce.” A care package of full, photo-ready Mason jars from Mom’s fruit cellar arrived within a week.

Several days later, I received a thick packet of recipes, some on notecards in my mother’s perfect printing and others in faded type on brittle scraps of paper. And suddenly, my book of 37 recipes called for a table of contents and more hours searching for additional quips and clips.

I impressed myself by creating dishes I had eaten often, but never made. I overcame my fear of yeast and conquered cinnamon rolls; made stuffed cabbage that would have impressed my Slovak ancestors; and whipped up a batch of ham barbecues when I discovered a local deli guy who could almost duplicate authentic Pittsburgh chipped ham.

Thanksgiving weekend finally found us at Office Depot, beaming at our stack of perfect, 68-page labors of love. We weren’t with my family for the holidays, so I waited to hear from them after their traditional Christmas Eve gift opening. When they called and handed the phone from person to person, I heard reactions alternating among tears, dis-

belief, and exclamations of recognition over “the plaid plate!” and “the little blue bowl!”

I basked in the glow of inspired gift-giving until I realized I was afraid to use the cookbook myself. The trepidation lasted until April, when I finally worked up the nerve to make a couple of our traditional Easter favorites. Within minutes of opening the book to the apricot cookie page, I spilled a spoonful of gloppy fruit filling right in the middle of the recipe.

After berating myself into an “I ruined it!” tizzy, I wiped up the spill and tried to erase the stain. No luck. There was nothing left to do except make the cookies—which turned out perfectly, with the sweet-tart apricots wrapped in flaky pastry that was rolled in sugar.

Then I moved on to hrutka, a Slovak dish that involves stirring eggs and milk together for a very long time. I folded the cookbook so I was just looking at the page with the recipe while I stirred. And I didn’t realize until I finished that I had set the book down on the wet counter, where it stuck. When I picked it up, the rrrripping sound told me that most of the hrutka photograph remained behind, which made me cry.

It took most of the day before I could rationalize that the stain and torn page constituted a baptism rather than a tragedy. I remembered that most of Mom’s cookbooks had stained, torn, and stuck-together pages because those were the ones she used the most often to feed our family. She never would have griped about what they looked like because she was a “don’t sweat the small stuff” kind of person, long before that term came into being. Mom had her priorities straight then, and she still does today, at 93.

Those pristine copies of “Evelyn’s Kitchen” made a memorable first impression, but they weren’t meant to sit on a shelf, unspoiled and unused. It was a relief to realize that their value will increase with every rip and splatter that helps our family keep Mom’s culinary traditions alive—one mess or accident at a time.

Mary Ellen McGinty Collins is a freelance writer whose personal essays have appeared in *The Arizona Republic*, *The Christian Science Monitor*, *Angie’s List Magazine*, *Notre Dame Magazine*, *Outdoor Life*, and *Writer’s Digest*. Her website is MaryEllenCollins.com



APRICOT COOKIES

Apricot cookies, a family classic.

MAKES APPROXIMATELY 36 TO 40 COOKIES

- 1 bag or box of dried sulfured apricots
- 3/4 cup sugar, plus more for rolling cookies
- 1-2 tablespoons lemon juice
- Cornstarch, as needed
- 3 sticks butter
- 3 cups flour
- 3 egg yolks
- 1 cup sour cream



For the filling: Place dried apricots in a bowl and add water until they are just covered. Soak overnight.

Drain apricots the next day. Transfer to a saucepan and cook, without water, over a stovetop until they soften, about 1/2 hour. Stir as needed.

Add sugar to taste, approximately 3/4 cup sugar to 1 box of apricots. Stir.

Add 1 to 2 tablespoons lemon juice. Add a little cornstarch if filling is too runny.

For the dough: Combine butter and flour using a pastry cutter.

Combine egg yolks and sour cream in a separate bowl.

Add liquid to dry ingredients and mix with a wooden spoon. (NOT a mixer.)

Roll out dough and cut into squares with a pizza cutter, 3 x 3 inches or a little smaller.

Place about a teaspoon of apricot filling in the middle of a square. Fold one corner of the dough over the filling and press lightly, and then fold the opposite corner over and press. Roll cookie in sugar.

Bake at 400 degrees F for 12 to 15 minutes.



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