

Kitchen lore

by Lydia Lovell

Like the rest of us, there were times when even Aunt Olivia exhibited a certain amount of stress. These occasions usually came about after there'd been a lot of company around for several days. During the holidays, for instance, folks were coming and going, dropping in for a quick visit and staying a couple of hours to catch up on all the news. While all kinds of cooking projects were underway during waking hours, any youngster at the door was urged to come right in and have a cup of hot cocoa with a marshmallow floated on top . . . and tell about recent activities. . . . Aunt Olivia's kitchen was that kind of place, and Aunt Olivia was that kind of person.

The only trouble was, all the traffic sometimes led to some small confusions, and at times Aunt Olivia forgot to make a note to replenish a staple ingredient, or she'd turn away from the stove at a crucial moment . . . in order to welcome a newcomer . . . and when she looked back, a minor disaster may have occurred.

Stress is one thing. Dealing with it is something else. Aunt Olivia may not have had every tool at her fingertips for dealing with stress appropriately, but she did seem to know a cure for almost every difficulty.

For instance, if her supply of baking powder ran out while she was in the process of putting together a cake, Aunt Olivia knew just how to make her own. For 1 t. of baking powder, she used $\frac{1}{4}$ t. baking soda plus $\frac{5}{8}$ t. cream of tartar. She knew she could also get the same results by stirring $\frac{1}{4}$ t. of baking soda into $\frac{1}{4}$ C. of molasses, or into $\frac{1}{2}$ C. of soured milk or buttermilk, or by mixing $\frac{1}{4}$ t. baking soda with $\frac{1}{2}$ t. vinegar or lemon juice in enough sweet milk to make half a cup. Then she adjusted the other liquids in her recipe to compensate for using extra milk.

In substituting for a cup of butter, Aunt Olivia often used margarine in equal proportions. If she chose, instead, hydrogenated fat such as Crisco or Spry, however, she used only $\frac{7}{8}$ of a cup, plus $\frac{1}{2}$ t. extra salt. She taught me never to attempt to use diet or whipped margarine to substitute for butter because it has lower fat content and greater volume; that will throw ingredient quantities out of proportion.

A cup of plain yogurt can substitute for a cup of buttermilk. Or add enough sweet milk to one T. vinegar or lemon juice to equal a cup, and let stand five minutes. For one cup of sour cream, use 3 T. butter, plus $\frac{7}{8}$ C. buttermilk or yogurt. For a cup of coffee cream, (20% fat), use 3 T. butter plus $\frac{7}{8}$ C. sweet milk. For a cup of heavy cream, (40% fat), use $\frac{1}{2}$ C. butter plus $\frac{3}{4}$ C. milk. If you run low on whole milk, use 1 C. reconstituted non-fat dry milk plus $2\frac{1}{2}$ t. butter or margarine. Or mix $\frac{1}{4}$ C. dry whole milk powder with $\frac{7}{8}$ C. water.

Unsweetened or semi-sweet chocolate or cocoa can be used interchangeably by adding or subtracting other ingredients in a recipe. Three T. cocoa plus 1 T. melted butter, shortening, or vegetable oil equals 1 ounce or 1 square unsweetened chocolate. One ounce of unsweetened chocolate, plus 4 T. sugar, equals $1\frac{3}{4}$ ounces of semi-sweet. If your recipe calls for unsweetened chocolate, and all you have in the house is semi-sweet, decrease the sugar in the recipe by 4 t. for each ounce of chocolate used.

If your recipe calls for a cup of honey, and there's no honey on the pantry shelf, use $1\frac{1}{4}$ C. sugar plus $\frac{1}{4}$ C. more than usual of whatever liquid is called for in the recipe. For a cup of brown sugar, use a cup of white sugar plus 2 T. molasses.

Some sauce and pudding recipes call for thickeners. One T. flour equals $1\frac{1}{2}$ t. cornstarch or arrowroot. For one cup of sifted cake flour, one cup minus 2 T. sifted all-purpose flour may be used. For a cup of all-purpose flour, use a cup minus 2 T. of whole wheat flour. And for one cup of self-rising flour, use a cup of all-purpose flour plus $1\frac{1}{2}$ t. baking powder and $\frac{1}{2}$ t. salt.

In addition to substitutions, Aunt Olivia knew how to correct a curdled hollandaise or mayonnaise sauce by whisking in a teaspoon or two of boiling water, one drop at a



time. If that didn't work, she put the yolk of an egg into a bowl, beat until foamy, and then poured in the curdled sauce, very slowly, beating with a whisk until the sauce smoothed.

Other kitchen tricks were to be learned at the elbow of this dear lady who so generously shared her talents. Yeasts, she instructed, should be dissolved in warm, not hot, water. Hot water kills the yeast. To help yeast grow, add a teaspoon of sugar to the warm water, and remember to subtract it from other sweetenings. Gelatin will soften best if first added to a cold liquid, then dissolved as the liquid is heated, but do not allow to boil or its jelling power is reduced.

Want to remove skin from tomatoes, almonds, peaches? Drop tomatoes or almonds in boiling water for one minute. For peaches, just dip them into boiling water. How to pit fresh cherries? Push the stones out with the U-bend of a paper clip. You lose too much juice if you try to squeeze the pit out. What to do with leftover tomato paste? Most recipes call for only a tablespoonful or two; you end up with better than a half-canful. Suggestion: place one tablespoonful on a small square of aluminium foil, fold and wrap tightly, and freeze. Repeat with remaining contents of can. You'll always have measured amounts of tomato paste on hand.

Aunt Olivia taught me how to choose pineapples at the fruit counter as well as how to serve them, fresh or cooked. Pineapples ripen after they are harvested but an unripe one with no fragrance will never develop full flavor. Choose a fragrant pineapple, one that smells sweet and delicate. If the stalk end is moldy or discolored, if the fruit is bruised, or if the leaves are wilted, do not buy.

Finally, and most important of all to the Lovells because they are partial to meals featuring fish for the main course, Aunt Olivia showed me how to buy fish. Eyes of fresh fish are bright and bulging, and its skin shines. The flesh should be firm and springy to the touch. Gills should be clean and bright red. Dirty, dark, or slimy gills are a sure sign the fish is past its prime. Dull, discolored, or sunken eyes and lifeless skin tell the fish has been too long out of the water.

Fish that has been frozen requires special care. Unless thoroughly thawed in the refrigerator, frozen fish is apt to be watery, flabby, and lacking in flavor when cooked; the outside layers dry out before the interior has time to thaw. Lovells are not alone, of course, in preferring to eat fresh fish. Now and then someone brings us a fresh-caught fish just as we're sitting down to supper. We keep it 'til the next day without losing quality by wrapping it in several layers of newspaper and storing it in the coldest part of the refrigerator. Second best to right-out-of-the-water is a fish that's been well-refrigerated for 24 hours.

And that's no fish story. It's straight from Aunt Olivia's kitchen lore, and nothing she ever taught me about cooking turned out wrong. Many is the time I've saved the day by using one of her substitutions. I hope they'll help you handle stress, too, just as well as she did.