

Recipes Secret vs. Recipes Shared

by Lydia Lovell

Looking back to the days when Aunt Olivia enjoyed her well-earned reputation as one of the finest cooks in the County of Barnstable, I sometimes wonder just how she managed it. From glad experience I witness to her success; not only did I share the results almost daily, but her prowess rubbed off on me. On many occasions while I was still but a child, Aunt Olivia and Uncle Henry took me with them on outings; invariably at such times, we met someone to whom I was presented. In those days, please remember, children were still taught to be seen and not heard . . . at least in public. Whenever I was introduced to an adult I was asked, "Are you learning to cook like your Aunt Olivia?"

And I would answer, "Yes, Ma'am, I am." But learning to be as good a cook as she was was not easy even with first-hand lessons.

On the big cast-iron stove that stood in the kitchen of the Lovell homestead, there was no thermostat. A temperature gauge on the front of the oven door provided the only clue to degrees of heat within. Aunt Olivia glanced at that gauge but her most reliable test of whether the oven was too hot, not quite hot enough, or just right was feeling the heat of the oven's interior air with her hand. Opening wide the oven door, she plunged her bare hand into its cavernous recess. When teaching me, she encouraged me to do likewise. I never did learn to judge oven temperature by feeling the heat and was glad when modern engineering brought thermostats to ovens.

Aunt Olivia did teach me many useful lessons; from her I learned to measure ingredients carefully, accurately, and never to guess. Failure to measure might not spoil a special dish but, as Aunt Olivia pointed out, "Suppose you think a recipe might be improved if you increase one ingredient. And suppose you are right. If you didn't measure and if you didn't keep track of the change, the next time you wanted to make it, you wouldn't remember exactly what you did that made the difference. So always measure. And if you change a measurement, always make a note of it. Keep a record of your successes. Keep a record of experiments that were less than successful too. You don't want to make the same mistake twice, do you?"

Like all good teachers, Aunt Olivia set a good example by recording her trial adjustments and their results on the reverse of recipe cards and by penciling neat notations on the margins of her cookbook pages. Once satisfied a change in measurements should be permanent, her pen inked the new quantity suggested. To this day, I follow her example.

Because chicken dinners are now as popular as in years past, good recipes are always welcome. A notation Aunt Olivia made on the edge of a well-worn page of a recipe book that appears to have been much-handled reads, "Good. Use chicken breasts, boned, for special occasions." The recipe's title? CHICKEN A LA LEMON.

1 chicken, cut up
1/2 t. lemon rind
1/4 C. lemon juice
1/2 C. corn oil, divided
1/2 t. salt
1/4 t. each: ground thyme, garlic powder, marjoram, pepper
1/2 C. flour
1/2 t. paprika

Place chicken parts in large shallow pan. Mix lemon rind and juice, half the oil, and spices together. Pour over chicken and marinate in refrigerator several hours, turning occasionally. Two hours before mealtime, drain chicken on paper towels and discard marinade. Combine flour and paprika. Dredge

chicken. Pour remaining oil into baking pan. Add chicken, skin-side-down. Bake at 400° for 30 minutes, turn, bake 20 minutes longer at 350°.

Aunt Olivia simplified dredging by mixing flour and paprika in a paper bag and shaking the chicken pieces, one by one; I use a plastic bag in which vegetables have been brought home from the store. Aunt Olivia demonstrated that it is much easier to grate lemon peel before squeezing juice from the fruit than afterward. She also showed me how to get a small quantity of juice from a lemon without cutting it open by puncturing the peel with a fork and squeezing. The lemon, stored in the refrigerator, will keep longer than a cut one.

Had aluminum foil been available to her, Aunt Olivia would have lined her baking pan with it as I do, not only to save time washing the pan, but also to prevent grease from going down the sink drain.

To serve with baked chicken, Aunt Olivia often prepared a vegetable-and-rice casserole because she baked them in the same oven. One of Uncle Henry's favorites was CABBAGE CASSEROLE.

4 C. shredded raw cabbage
1/2 C. minced green pepper
1 medium onion, sliced and ringed
3/4 C. raw brown rice
1 C. cottage cheese
1 egg, beaten
1 t. salt
1 10-oz. can tomato soup
1 C. boiling water

In a 3-quart well-buttered casserole, layer cabbage, peppers, onion, and rice. Mix cottage cheese, egg, and salt together; stir soup into boiling water; combine the liquids and pour into casserole. Cover and bake at 350° for one hour. When baking with Chicken a la Lemon, put the casserole in oven after chicken has baked 15 minutes, making a total baking time of 45 minutes. Check to be sure rice is tender before removing from oven.

On the reverse of her recipe card for Cabbage Casserole, Aunt Olivia has left us a message. "For a one-dish meal," she suggests, "make meat balls (or use leftovers) and brown

in oil. Drain and layer over rice before pouring in liquid."

Although her files include several recipes for MEAT-BALLS, the one we like best was this one:

1 lb. ground beef
1/2 C. uncooked rolled oats
1 egg, beaten
1/2 t. poultry seasoning
1 T. finely chopped fresh parsley
1 t. salt & a dash of pepper
1/2 t. paprika

1 medium onion, finely chopped

Combine all ingredients and form into balls the size of walnuts. Line a Dutch oven with foil. Place meatballs on a rack in the bottom of the Dutch oven. Bake, uncovered, in a 400° oven for 20 minutes.

For a taste-and-texture complement to baked chicken and cabbage casserole, prepare CRAZY FRUIT SALAD.

1 3-oz. pkg. cream cheese, softened
2 T. lemon juice
1/8 t. salt
1/2 C. sour cream
1 16-oz. can fruit cocktail, drained
1/4 C. pecans or walnuts, chopped
2 T. maraschino cherries, diced
1 large sliced banana
meat and juice of an orange or grapefruit

In a large bowl, combine first 4 ingredients. Fold in sour cream. Fold in fruits and nuts. Pour into ice cube trays and freeze three to four hours until firm. Unmold and slice. Serve on lettuce.

Aunt Olivia recommended dicing maraschino cherries with a blade dipped into confectioners' sugar to keep fruit from sticking to the chopper. A good idea when chopping raisins, currants, or dates, too.

Little study is necessary to determine all these recipes may be prepared in advance of mealtime and require a minimum of attention at the end of a busy day. The result is a nutritionally well-balanced meal. For a family with small appetites, Crazy Fruit Salad easily doubles for Crazy Fruit Compote, a dessert. Eliminate the lettuce and serve in sauce dishes. Pass a plate of cookies.

If Aunt Olivia gave any thought to her own immortality, she must have taken comfort in knowing her recipes would survive her. A framed sampler hanging on her kitchen wall read "A recipe kept secret is soon forgotten; a recipe shared is enjoyed for generations." She wasn't the first to appreciate its sentiment nor will I be the last.

Bon Appetit.