

Aunt Olivia's Kitchen

Traditions of Easter Sunday

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by Lydia Lovell

Tradition holds an important position for members of the Lovell family; one tradition is a baked ham dinner on Easter Sunday. Years ago, the ham, smoked the preceding fall, hung all winter from a high rafter out in the woodshed. One of the chores listed on Uncle Henry's Good Friday calendar was 'bring in the ham.'

Saturday morning Aunt Olivia set a deep pot of water to boil on top of the kitchen stove. While the kettle came to heat, she unwrapped the ham, washed it thoroughly, trimmed up any loose edges and, when the water simmered, added one cup of brown sugar, a stick of cinnamon, and a half-cup of cider vinegar. Then she lowered the ham into the liquid, being careful not to spatter.

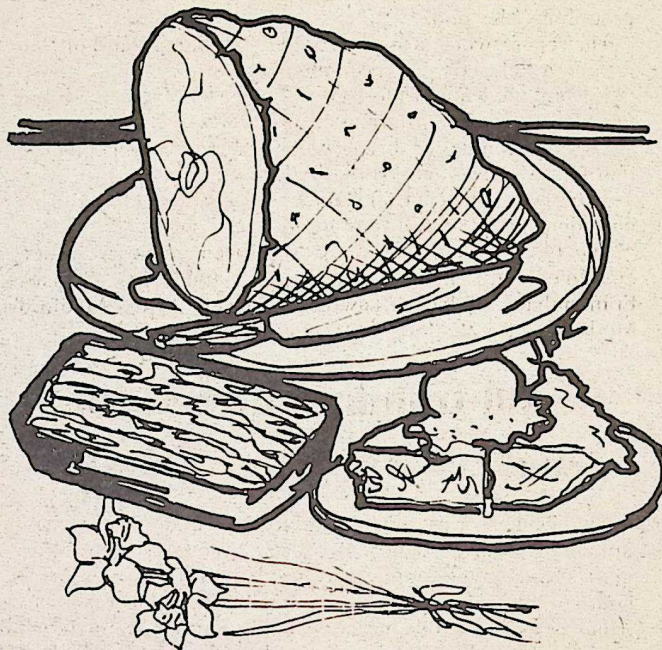
For the next five or six hours, the ham cooked slowly, the pot kept 'just off the boil.' More water was added whenever necessary to keep the ham covered. Mid-afternoon, the meat being sufficiently cooked, Aunt Olivia slid the pot to the rear of the stove. There it stayed all night, the ham standing in the liquid.

Easter Sunday breakfast differed from other Sunday breakfasts because Aunt Olivia always served us hot cross buns with our scrambled eggs and bacon rather than the usual muffins or toasted thick slices of homemade oatmeal bread... another tradition. Breakfast over, dishes cleared away and washed up, Aunt Olivia lifted the ham from the pot, removed its skin, and scraped away all but a thin layer of surface fat. She left just enough fat to crisp up nicely during the baking process.

Next came scroing the ham's surface in a diamond-shaped pattern with a sharp knife, and sticking in whole cloves at each place where the scorings intersected. Just before sliding the large rectangular-shaped pan containing the clove-studded ham into the oven for its final baking, Aunt Olivia sprinkled about a half-cup of dark brown sugar over the top. After banking the fire so the ham would bake slowly, its interior be thoroughly heated and its exterior be deliciously crisped, Aunt Olivia hung her apron on the hook behind the pantry door, slipped out of her cotton house dress and into her go-to-meeting clothes. Then, she and Uncle Henry, accompanied by my parents, my brother, and me, left for church.

Some years neither Aunt Olivia nor my mother had a brand new bonnet to wear on Easter, but I cannot remember a single time that we didn't have baked ham for Easter dinner.

When church services were over and Uncle Henry had driven us all home again, Aunt Olivia sniffed audibly as she entered the kitchen. Sometimes she opened the oven door hurriedly and basted the ham with pan juices even before she removed her hat. A few short minutes later, she had peeled a panful of Irish potatoes, scraped and sliced a bunch of carrots, and opened a can of garden peas. Frozen packaged peas were not yet available.



While the vegetables boiled, Aunt Olivia set about creating sauce for the ham. With one teaspoon of dry mustard and 1/4 teaspoon each of cinnamon and allspice, she mixed two tablespoons of cider vinegar and then added a jar of crabapple or currant jelly. Stirring these ingredients together on the stove in a shallow skillet until the jelly melted resulted in a fine sweet-sour sauce exactly right for baked ham.

On Cape Cod, in those days as in these, you were likely to wake up to a dusting of snow on the ground on Easter Sunday; it was a rare Easter, indeed, that the season's first stalks of rhubarb were ready for pulling but, if someone had been visiting friends or relatives on Long Island or along the Connecticut shore, spring was just enough further advanced down there that fresh rhubarb might find its way to the Cape. After a dinner of baked ham, **Rhubarb-Strawberry Pie** really hits the spot.

Have ready enough pastry dough for a two-crust pie. Preheat oven to 425°. Wash and slice rhubarb stalks into 1/2" pices. Place about three cups of rhubarb in a saucpan and add 3/4 cup of granulated sugar. Cook over low heat, stirring occasionally to prevent sticking, until sugar and rhubarb are syrupy. Meanwhile, line a pie plate with half the pastry dough.

When syrup forms, pour hot rhubarb into unbaked pie shell. Immediately, sprinkle on one package of strawberry flavored Jell-O, put the top crust in place making sure it is vented adequately to allow steam to escape, crimp edges, and bake 40 minutes. Lower oven temperature to 400° at the time you put pie in oven. A sheet of aluminum foil under the pie plate to catch drips can save oven cleanups.

Lacking rhubarb at Eastertime, Aunt Olivia sometimes served **Dutch Apple Cake** for dessert, a recipe given her by a friend and neighbor, Mrs. Mabel Robbins.

1/4 C. sugar
1/2 C. butter
1 egg
2/3 C. water

2 C. flour
3 t. baking powder
3 large red apples
nutmeg and sugar

Preheat oven to 375°. Cream together the sugar and butter. Beat egg, add water, and stir. Sift flour and baking powder together. Alternately, add dry ingredients, then egg and water to creamed sugar and butter mixture. Mix thoroughly. Pour batter into a well-greased 8"x8"x2" pan.

Quarter and core apples but do not peel; slice lengthwise into wedges about 1/8" thick at peeling edge. Arrange apples on top of batter in overlapping rows, thin side down. Dust with nutmeg and a little sugar. Bake 35 to 40 minutes. Serve with whipped cream or vanilla ice cream.

Aunt Olivia prepared rhubarb-strawberry pie or Dutch apple cake the day before she planned to serve them. In the Lovell family, tradition called for serving the pie cold, pouring each child an extra glass of milk, and making a fresh pot of strong coffee for the grown-ups. Dutch apple cake, though, invariably came to the table hot. The last thing Aunt Olivia did before removing her apron and leaving the kitchen to begin the meal was pop the pan of Dutch apple cake back into the oven to heat while the family polished off the main course.

If whipped cream accompanied this delectable dish, Aunt Olivia's egg beater clattered briskly while we youngsters cleared the dishes, refilled the milk glasses, and arranged coffee cups and saucers for the older generation sitting and waiting patiently for the meal's crowning touch to arrive. Vanilla ice cream is an excellent topping for apple cake but lacks a certain elegance that whipped cream brings to a dessert.

Easter traditions are still being observed by many Lovells. There's one branch of the family living out on the Vineyard in a house that overlooks Edgartown Light...and while I'm not positive just which family traditions those particular Lovells have clung to, I'd be surprised if at least one of them wasn't up early on Easter morning, watching the sun lift from behind the pine- and oak-clad hills of Chappaquiddick Island, and conducting his own private Easter Sunday sunrise worship service.