

From Aunt Olivia's kitchen

Planning ahead for Labor Day

by Lydia Lovell

About this time each year, Uncle Henry and Aunt Olivia began planning their annual Labor Day Weekend gathering. Perhaps in honor of Samuel Gompers, father of United States labor unions, Labor Day was one holiday for which Aunt Olivia never cooked. She invited the family to attend the Labor Day party, but she prepared not a single dish herself. Instead, she planned the menu right down to the last green olive, wrote out recipes on 3" x 5" cards, and tucked two or three in each invitation.

Recipients of invitations and recipes accepted both with enthusiasm. Part of the fun was the certainty that even though the same recipes might be followed by Cousin Evelyn, Aunt Cora, Cousin Sara, and Cousin Kate, no dish was exactly the same as any other. Similar, yes, but subtly different.

Labor Day's affair was usually held on Sunday rather than on the actual holiday because some members of the tribe returned to the Homestead from distant towns, some as far away as Boston suburbs, and making the trip proved pleasanter and easier on Sunday. A similar situation prevails today for despite new highways and technological improvements, traffic remains a challenge.

Aunt Olivia's Labor Day menu always met certain criteria. Nobody was asked to bring food needing to be kept hot until serving time, but there was no prohibition against reheating in Aunt Olivia's oven. The goal was simplicity and quality. Depending on the number of people expected, Aunt Olivia assigned as many recipes as necessary to feed us all substantially.

One year there were to be twenty of us; Aunt Olivia asked Cousin Kate and Cousin Sara to bring **Chicken Caserole**. She sent them both the following recipe:

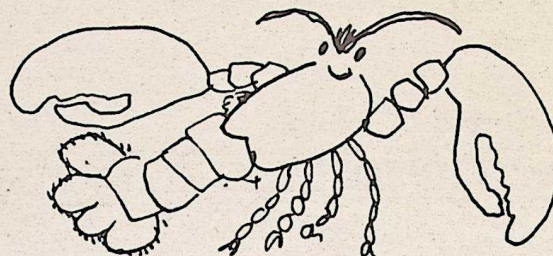
23-lb. frying chickens
 1/3 C. margarine
 3 C. chopped celery
 1 med. onion, chopped
 1 lb. shredded Cheddar
 cheese

2 10-oz. cans mushroom soup,
 undiluted
 6 eggs, slightly beaten
 1/2 t. lemon pepper seasoning
 1/4 t. black pepper
 1 16-oz. pkg. herb-seasoned
 stuffing mix

Cut up chicken. In a Dutch oven, simmer chicken pieces, covered, in 8 C. water for an hour-and-a-half. Remove chicken and set aside to cool. Reserve 4 cups broth. When chicken cools enough to handle, skin and bone it; dice meat and set aside.

In Dutch oven, saute celery and onion in butter until tender. Add reserved broth, cheese, soup, eggs, and seasoning. Add chicken meat and mix well. Spoon mixture into lightly greased broiler pan (12"x14"x3"); refrigerate over night. At Aunt Olivia's house, sprinkle stuffing mix on top and bake at 350° for 45 minutes.

Cousin Evelyn and Aunt Cora were each asked to bring **Cumberland Ham**. The recipe for Cumberland sauce follows.



½ C. orange juice
 2 t. lemon juice
 1/8 t. dry mustard
 ¼ t. ground cloves
 2 T. water

1 10-oz. jar currant jelly
½ t. grated orange peel
1 T. cornstarch
¼ C. cool water

In a medium saucepan, combine all ingredients except cornstarch and water. Cook over low heat, stirring, until jelly melts. Remove from heat. Mix cornstarch in cool water and stir into mixture. Return to fire, cook, stirring constantly until thickened.

Bake one 5-lb. canned boneless ham for one-and-one-quarter hours at 325°. Spoon sauce over ham three or four times while baking. Serve remaining sauce, hot, at the table.

All four ladies were also assigned **Pasta Salad**; their recipes read:

1 lb. pasta shells
½ med. onion, chopped
1 pkg. frozen peas

3 stalks celery, chopped
 $\frac{3}{4}$ C. mayonnaise
 $\frac{1}{4}$ C. Dijon mustard

Cook shells as directed on package. Drain and toss with 2 T. mayonnaise. Cook peas in boiling water for 30 seconds. Drain. Combine peas with chopped onions and celery. Mix mayonnaise and mustard together and toss with other ingredients. Chill. NOTE: Olivia will supply lettuce and fresh raw mushrooms to slice on top at serving time.

That same year my mother and I were assigned two appetizers, muffins, and dessert. The first appetizer yielded 100 **Blue Cheese Straws**.

1 C. flour
1 t. salt
4 T. butter
4 T. margarine

1/4 t. paprika
1/4 t. lemon pepper
water to make stiff paste
1/2 C. (4 oz.) Danish blue
cheese

Preheat oven to 400°. Sift flour, salt, pepper, and paprika together. Rub in butter and margarine. Add only enough cold water to make a stiff paste. Knead lightly. Roll out a rectangle about 1/8" thick. Grate cheese evenly over half of rectangle. Fold pastry to completely cover cheese. Roll again until cheese just shows through pastry (quite thin). Trim edges, divide into six lengthwise pieces, and cut narrow strips about 1/4" wide and 3" long. Arrange on baking sheets and bake 10 minutes at 400°. Cool and store in airtight tin.

The other appetizer, **Lobster Lovers' Spread**, we served surrounded with carrot and celery strips, cauliflowerets, and crackers.

**1 lb. lobster meat,
coarse chopped**
**1 pkg. dry Italian salad
dressing mix**

½ C. mayonnaise
1 T. horseradish mustard
1 C. sour cream
chopped parsley for garnish

Combine lobster, dressing mix, sour cream, mayonnaise, and mustard. Chill until firm. Form into a ball. Roll in chopped parsley. Makes three cups.

And we prepared **Bran Muffins**, tripling the following recipe to yield about 40 muffins. Prepared as follows, the yield is 12 to 14.

1 C. flour
 $\frac{1}{2}$ C. sugar
 $2\frac{1}{2}$ t. baking powder
 $\frac{1}{2}$ t. baking soda
 $\frac{1}{2}$ t. salt

1¼ C. bran flakes
1 C. milk
1 egg
¼ C. vegetable oil

Preheat oven to 400°; combine first five ingredients; set aside. In a large bowl, mix bran with milk until moistened; let stand five minutes; then add egg and oil, beating until blended. Fold in flour mixture, stirring until just combined; do not overmix. Fill greased 2½" muffin cups 2/3 full; bake about 20 minutes.

Our last assignment was **Chocolate Cheese Cake**. Cousin Sara made one too.

½ C. unsalted butter, melted 1 C. sugar
 2 C. chocolate cake crumbs 1 C. eggs (4 or 5)
 2 oz. bittersweet chocolate 1 lb. cream cheese, softened
 2 T. strong coffee 4 sq. baking chocolate
 2 T. cocoa powder, heaping ⅓ C. sour cream

Use a 9" spring form pan. Do not butter. Mix cake crumbs with melted butter and press them evenly into the pan. Wrap and freeze, or place in the refrigerator overnight. In the top of a double boiler, over hot but not simmering water, melt 2 sq. bittersweet chocolate with coffee; set aside. Sift the cocoa into the sugar, blend chocolate, sugar, cocoa, eggs, and cream cheese until just smooth. Do not overmix. The cheese cake will crack in the oven if overmixed. To achieve a foolproof result, refrigerate overnight to "relax" it. Preheat oven to 325°. Pour batter into spring form and bake until all but the center inch is set, about an hour. The center will set as cake cools. Serves twelve.

At the gathering Aunt Olivia sat and entertained her guests. She never once entered the kitchen. Uncle Henry dispensed beverages, and the cousins, my Aunt Cora, my mother and I served joyfully. Aunt Olivia said, "It's a great pleasure to celebrate Labor Day doing nothing-a-tall surrounded by people I love."

Perhaps we should make it a Labor Day tradition, too.

