

From
Aunt Olivia's Kitchen



Love's Labor - Well Worth It!

by Lydia Lovell

Love's labor, according to Shakespeare, was lost. I guess dear William didn't know much about cooking. And from what I've heard about him, the bard was not terribly well-domesticated. Perhaps Anne Hathaway wasn't a marvelous cook. Or perhaps Will simply didn't appreciate fine food. Who knows, really, after all these years? In any event, Aunt Olivia's labors of love were not lost at all and, if we take a few pages from her recipe books, ours won't be either.

Let me say at the very beginning so that you won't get the wrong impression, though, the affection that bloomed between Uncle Henry and Aunt Olivia never depended upon her efforts in the kitchen. Uncle Henry adored her; he would have loved her whether she could boil an egg or not. She, in turn, was devoted to him. Her joys arose from his happiness. Whatever these two did, what decisions they made, what actions they pursued, each thought first of the other. It was this that may account for Aunt Olivia's life-long pleasure in cooking and Henry's never-ceasing appreciation of her efforts. In any case, I was a frequent beneficiary of their devotion because a great deal of free time in my childhood was spent in their company. The lessons I learned about human relationships as well as about cooking have remained with me all my life.

On Valentine's Day, Aunt Olivia prepared for Uncle Henry

all his most favorite foods. From breakfast through supper, special treats appeared in rapid succession and each was greeted enthusiastically and rewarded in Uncle Henry's own inimitable fashion.

Aunt Olivia started the day by spreading the breakfast table with a white cloth decorated with crimson hearts cut from construction paper. Uncle Henry reciprocated with Valentine cards, one for Aunt Olivia and one for me, propped against the milk pitcher.

Tall glasses of tomato juice began the meal; the traditional "love apple" yielding up its ruddy goodness, brightened the drabest February weather. When Aunt Olivia brought our eggs, she had poached them in heart-shaped molds and centered them on slices of toast trimmed in the shape of a heart. A big plate of extra toast was accompanied by a heart-shaped crystal bowl brimming with strawberry jam saved for this day from the batches Aunt Olivia had put up last June.

Breakfast was but the beginning. As he did every morning, Uncle Henry departed for the village where he picked up the mail, his daily paper, and stopped at Crocker's store to exchange news and views with his neighbors gathered there. While at the store on Valentine's Day, Uncle Henry searched for a small gift for Aunt Olivia. He wanted nothing expensive or ostentatious, just a little something to surprise her. Once he chose a pink ceramic pin in the shape of a rose. She wore it every Valentine's Day for the rest of her life. Another time his gift was a fat red velvet pin cushion, heart-shaped, and trimmed with snow-white lace. It graced her dressing table for years. Once he brought a pair of purple heart-shaped pot holders. These, cut from heavy felt and quilted, hung from that day on from a cuphook next to the stove. The Crocker brothers who ran the store in those days stocked items they knew would sell on special occasions like birthdays, anniversaries, and Valentine's Day. Uncle Henry was among their best customers.

While these two dear people made much of every holiday, enjoyed the sentiment of each, and renewed their mutual awareness of affection for one another, I watched and learned, and basked in the warm atmosphere those feelings generated.

Now Uncle Henry, like many other people, loved chocolate. He often said he could smell Aunt Olivia's chocolate brownies baking from inside Crocker's Store. Since the distance between the store and their kitchen was better than a mile, we doubted his veracity, but we know from experience that no sooner had Aunt Olivia removed a pan of brownies from the oven than Uncle Henry re-appeared. But brownies were not special enough. Valentine's Day called for **Black Bottom Pie**.

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Aunt Olivia usually commenced the procedure the day before.

First, she made a simple ginger-cookie crust, rolling 14 or 15 crisp ginger cookies to fine meal, mixing them with 6 table spoons of melted butter, and pressing the mixture firmly into a pie plate, covering sides and bottom with the buttery crumbs. She baked the shell about 10 minutes at 325° and set it aside to cool.

Her second step produced the basic filling:

4 egg yolks	1-2/4 C. milk
1 T. gelatine	1 T. cornstarch
4 T. cold water	1/2 C. sugar
Pinch of salt	

Separate eggs and beat yolks until lemon colored. Set aside. Dissolve gelatine in water. In top of double boiler, put milk or to scald. Measure cornstarch and sugar and combine with salt. When milk is scalding hot but not boiling, remove from heat, add sugar mixture, then stir in the egg yolks. Cook over hot water, stirring occasionally, until thickened. Stir in the dissolved gelatine. Pour half of the resulting custard into a medium bowl. Set aside to cool. Keep the rest of the custard hot over boiling water.

For the chocolate layer, melt four squares of baking chocolate with two teaspoons of butter. When chocolate is melted, remove from heat and stir in two teaspoons of vanilla extract. Spoon about half the chocolate into the pie shell, smoothing with the back of a spoon, very carefully, to form a thin even layer over the bottom. Add the rest of the chocolate to the hot custard in the double boiler. Stir to mix and then immediately turn chocolate custard into the cooled crust. Smooth to an even surface with the back of spoon.

Next, prepare flavoring for the remaining custard:

4 egg whites	1/2 C. sugar
1/8 t. cream of tartar	2 t. rum extract

Beat the egg whites with the cream of tartar until stiff. Gradually add sugar while continuing to beat. Stir rum flavoring into cooled custard. Fold egg whites into custard and spread it carefully over chocolate layer. Refrigerate pie at this point. Aunt Olivia usually left the pie in her ice box overnight, but, if you got a late start and want to serve it the same day you make it, two to three hours is long enough.

Finally, just before you are ready to serve the pie to your Valentine, prepare its topping.

1 C. whipping cream
2 T. confectioners sugar
shaved chocolate

Whip the cream; add sugar slowly as the cream stiffens. Pipe cream on top of pie. With a paring knife, shave curls from a square of baking chocolate onto whipped cream. Do not attempt to shave the chocolate in advance; the shavings will melt or stick together; scrape directly over the whipped cream for best results. Use as much or as little as you like to achieve desired effect.

That is Black Bottom Pie, Uncle Henry's favorite of all desserts, Aunt Olivia's love-labor (and nothing lost...), and a dessert that sounds a lot more complicated to prepare than it really is. Once you assemble the ingredients and begin to put them together as directed, it goes very easily. If the way to your man's heart is through his stomach, and if he's a chocolate-lover, you will have won him and are sure to keep him just as long as you always make him a Black Bottom Pie on Valentine's Day.