

If you haven't bought Inspired Cooking, get one or six now before they're devoured, which they inevitably will be. Gorgeously bound and illustrated, meticulously organized and printed, its unadorned ingredient lists and cooking directions studded occasionally with blessings ancient, traditional, modern, and even international, IC is an absolute banquet. Each course of selected appetizer, entre¹, soup, salad, and dessert recipes is served between wholesome insights about First Presbyterian Church from distinguished friends of the church who had the effect of making me defy my mothers admonition - not to read at the table.

There's a "divine extravagance" about the book in the glory of its cakes, soups, salads, brunches, desserts, and entrees - parading poultry, meats, and fish in all manner of guises. The little blessing is a *propos*² -

*God, we ask you for what we want,
And in your divine extravagance,
You give us what we need.
Thank you, Lord.*

Yet in the constant return to tried and traditional - if virtuoso - vegetables - carrots and cabbages, peas, beans, and broccoli, and, of all things, the eternally maligned Brussels sprout, not to mention onions and their less familiar cousins the leeks - we find a simplicity best echoed in the little blessing by Edith Leatham we sang at my school before sitting down to "dinner":

*Thank you for the world so sweet,
Thank you for the food we eat.
Thank you for the birds that sing.
Thank you, God, for everything.*

Now, a book of recipes like Inspired Cooking is appreciated in the use rather than in the commentary. Truth is, there's not a lot you can say about recipes without risking a nasty retort. So, browsing the book, you just feast your eyes and contemplate recipes being actualized on the table. (I can tell you that the paper quality is excellent, pretty-well saliva proof.) Occasionally you stop and wonder. The name "Vulture Dip", for example (p. 30) is never explained. No carrion in the ingredients! A little tired when I first looked into the book I came across "Leek and Goat Cheese Tart" (p. 38). Where, I thought does one get good goat in Charlotte? Could one perhaps make do with llama or Thompson's Gazelle. Then I realized we were talking not about Cheese Tart but about Goat Cheese Tart. A good reader, like a good cook, must stay alert and be ready for nuance.

One appreciates the diversity evident in a book full of recipes that range from Italian, French, Sicilian, Indian, Asian, Moroccan, Mexican, Mediterranean, and Chinese. My stomach can rumble in all those languages. Even the Dutch get in with their oven. I was tickled to see good old custard described as *Crème Anglaise*. English custard. French name. American cookbook - and, hey, wait a minute, not even indexed! But food makes us all happy, and my wife has just given me one of the key-lime bars, courtesy of p. 258. (I see an Italian Cream Cake coming on - Robin's specialty. The recipe on p. 219 is bringing the battle gleam into her eye. It's going to be a great week).

By the way, if you think I'm going to stick my neck out to recommend certain recipes, forget it. I've been to enough Presbyterian covered dish dinners to know that not to sample them all is dangerous to the point of instigating vendetta³! I remember trying the green bean casserole of a certain elder years ago and not sampling the identical version of the wife of a fellow choir member. She made her husband quit the choir so that they could both stare at me balefully from the back pews. They shunned my children, and ignored the collection plate when my wife was doing the honors. (I am eating a slab of my wife's justly famous carrot cake as I write this, for she has seen me pause over the two marvelous recipes on pp. 216/217, and I saw the gleam of battle enter her eye again. I'll say this, though. Both those recipes serve 12-14. Robin's recipe is twice the size and serves 5! Us!!!)

¹ A number of French words, essential in cookage, should be accented and aren't (and, believe me, I know about accents) because my computer hasn't had much French. Therefore, if outraged by an omission, feel free to add as you see fit.

² See what I mean about accents? It just drives you crazy.

³ Don't be fooled by the statement about these being favorite recipes that are "not necessarily original." Slighting a recipe, original or not, is direct provocation. Trust me.

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We are invited to dine with assurance on Hot Cross Buns, Angel Biscuits, and (unblushingly) Divine Mushroom Soup, while feeling, no doubt, guilty before a dish of Deviled Eggs (in whose recipe 6 eggs are conjured by diabolical skill into 12 servings)⁴ and Decadent Chocolate Cake in which recipe we are tempted beyond Christian patience by “optional” whipped cream, fresh raspberries, raspberry puree, and - ah, the sin of it - “2 tbsps powdered sugar”. Muslims may settle for Crescent Rolls. Eggs and Bacon Supreme, we suppose, are fit for The King.

If there are male readers out there, occasionally driven to cooking for themselves and searching for something simple to make while ignoring the formalities of ingredients, I urge them to p. 25. The directions are simply “Mix all ingredients in a large bowl. Serve on pumpernickel bread or toast points.” I would suggest a slight adjustment. After “bowl”, add “Eat with large spoon.” And drop the serving suggestion - too complicated. To these same male readers, may I mention that occasional references in cooking instructions to “slightly oiled” and “well oiled” - even when the recipe calls for cognac, red wine, or rum as they occasionally do - do not mean what I suspect you think they mean.

I mentioned earlier the pleasant fillings, essays on the church’s history - the memories it has bequeathed, its good works, its meaning - sandwiched between the sections. That by Elder Wardie Martin is cleverly saved till last, for it celebrates the centrality of eating to church life, community, and conviviality. The extravagant table of laughter and fellowship leads not unnaturally to the simple bread and wine of humility and communion.

If this Englishman, accustomed as everyone knows to the splendid haute cuisine of his native land, may offer a slight criticism, it is to ask, “Where are the innovative approaches to traditional English dishes such as Beans on Toast and Spaghetti on Toast (both with chips)? Not to mention Lasagna with Chips, and the inimitable Shepherd’s Pie (usually with chips)? But I love this book. No more, when I come home from a hard day’s work ardent for the romance of dinner, will I settle for meatloaf. No, for me it’s *Galette de Crabe et Homard: France* I hunger for, and *Chicken Etouffee d’Asiago Cheese, Prosciutto, and Sage*. With Chips.

Women of the Church, Artists All, I Salute You.

⁴ All right, all right. You cut the eggs in half. But I can’t imagine anyone eating ½ one of these beauties and calling it a serving.

