

# THE ART OF COOKBOOK MARGINALIA

*A family history, in shorthand and scribbles*

*by Sarah Baird*

*A few greasy looking smears  
and next to them, written in soft pencil-  
by a beautiful girl, I could tell,  
whom I would never meet-  
“Pardon the egg salad stains, but I’m in love.”  
—from “Marginalia,” by Billy Collins*

I AM THE DAUGHTER OF A LIBRARIAN. Growing up, the leaning stacks of novels and winding shelves of yellowing flea-market hardbacks were like siblings for me. Each work of fiction, every biography, held a charming origin story or anecdote about how it came to occupy its current place next to the living-room ficus tree.

As with any relative, I treated these books with a kind of reverent courtesy. No dog-earring pages. No using a copy of *The Great Santini* as a makeshift coaster. And absolutely no writing, highlighting, or foreign script penciled inside even the most frayed dust jackets.

Cookbooks, though, were a different story.



Across the South—and in my Kentucky home—the marginalia bordering recipes, filling in the white spaces of tattered cookbook pages thumbed over time and time again, are as much a part of those texts as the recipes themselves: miniature vignettes of familial life. Culinary love letters passed down through generations, cookbook marginalia tell the tales of the perfect punch for sweltering June weddings, that Aunt Ruby loves extra raisins in her oatmeal cookies, and just how much bourbon a ham marinade really needs.

Recipe changes, trial-and-error additions, and ratio shifts fussily marked down in diagonal pencil swaths stripe the most notable cookbook of my childhood: *Talk About Good!* (1967 edition), by the Service League of Lafayette, Louisiana. No one is quite sure how this particular recipe collection found its way to our family’s culinary library: Neither my grandmother, the cookbook’s original owner, nor my mother had ever been to Lafayette. Yet its fade-resistant, fluorescent yellow jacket and cracked and creviced spine became the backbone of simple weeknight dinners and hallmark meals.

My maternal grandmother's lithe, delicate notations about half-cups of cake flour and my mother's bold directives on service make the cookbook a character study. (Like all good Southern families, we're full of characters.) It's also an unexpected time capsule, the opportunity for a journey through sensory memory. Running my fingers over the mahogany-stained pages, I can hear my grandfather let out a string of creative invective as his sweet tea sloshes out of the glass and onto the page. The presence of receipts-as-bookmarks, paper scraps, and marketing paraphernalia trapped inside cookbooks only adds to the charms that they possess—for several years, a particularly flimsy cookbook in our kitchen was held together with promotional Martha White packing tape.

Today, yard sales are a prime hunting ground for those of us who enjoy finding these note-covered cookbooks. Reading them, I feel like an eavesdropper on a multigenerational conversation, thumbing through to see what life in the kitchen was like for another family in another time. While I'm usually proud to play interloper, I occasionally blush at the intimacy that radiates from the pages, as if someone has accidentally laid out her diary alongside all the typical rummage-sale knickknacks.

Our family's heirloom Lafayette cookbook now occupies a shelf in my New Orleans kitchen, slightly closer to its Acadiana origins and with an owner now properly schooled on the finer points of boudin and cracklings. My own tentative notes (and appropriately placed grease stains) are slowly taking their place within its pages, as I write the newest chapters of our family's culinary history. 🍲

---

*Sarah Baird is a New Orleans-based writer and editor whose book on Kentucky sweets will be published in January 2014.  
PHOTOS, PAGE 8 & 9 by Emilie Dayan.*

# YOU HAVE TO FALL IN LOVE WITH YOUR POT

*As told to Sara Wood by Ida MaMusu*

