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God Almighty's MEAT HOUSE

HOW BERTHA FONTAINE'S FLEET OF HOME ECONOMISTS GOT US TO EAT MORE SEAFOOD.

BY JK JOHNSON

IMAGINE ANY GROCERY STORE OR SUPERMARKET IN THE URBAN SOUTH IN THE LATE 1960S, say one of Birmingham's sixteen Winn-Dixie stores. Imagine it on a Wednesday, the traditional shopping day of the week when newspapers arrived brimming with grocery store advertisements. Besides the usual family meals, maybe the woman doing her shopping this week—remember how things were done then—had something special in mind. Maybe Friday night, her husband's boss would be coming for dinner. Or maybe her husband's birthday falls on Saturday this year. Maybe the pastor finally accepted her invitation for Sunday dinner. Whatever the occasion, the meat counter would be her most important stop. She likely knew little about where the meat came from, but she didn't have to. She knew the roasts and fryers and hamburger and pork chops were packaged safely. She recognized and trusted the government's inspection seal, and she knew how to cook them. Maybe this particular Wednesday, though, amid all the beef and pork, she saw a package of fresh fish.

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Here she might have paused. She had been reading in the newspaper about the reasons fish—they called it "seafood" now—was as safe to eat as anything else at the meat counter, and the newspaper told her how to check to make sure. The women's magazines she read contained stories about how seafood was a healthy choice for her family. After she saw a cooking demonstration on WAPI's midday program by a government home economist who showed her just how easily anyone could prepare seafood, she sent off for some recipes. Broiled rock shrimp tails. Sunshine fillets. Oriental fish supreme. Seafood Creole with jalapeño hushpuppies. For most of the recipes, any kind of fresh or frozen seafood would do, and anything else she'd need was arranged neatly on the shelves and bins in the store behind her, row upon row of packaged, processed plenty. To make the seafood ambrosia, for instance, all she needed was this pound of fresh fish, some mayonnaise, lemon juice, a little orange rind, some sugar, celery, a can of Mandarin orange slices, olives, and green onions.

Not exactly the fish sticks with tartar sauce and tater tots she normally served, nor the canned tuna she sometimes bought. Somebody had done the work for her when she bought those. No need to figure out whether the cod that went into her fish sticks was fresh, no need to catch the cod herself, no need even to find it. Somebody else caught it, filleted it, sliced it into four-inch long bricks, breaded it, fried it, froze it, and packaged it. Serving fish to her family asked of her only that she heat it along with some tater tots and serve it with some tartar sauce and a little ketchup on the side. But here was a fresh fillet right in front of her, straight from the Gulf of Mexico. She'd read that if she pushed her finger into the fillet and the flesh sprang back quickly, it was more than fresh enough. If it smelled clean, maybe a little briny, not like fish at all, it was more than fresh enough.

Did she dare?

PREVIOUS, LEFT: Bertha Fontaine gives a fish cookery demonstration at Ft. Benning, GA, Nov. 1963; PREVIOUS, RIGHT: Fontaine demonstrates a recipe on *Woman's World* from WKRG-TV in Mobile, AL.

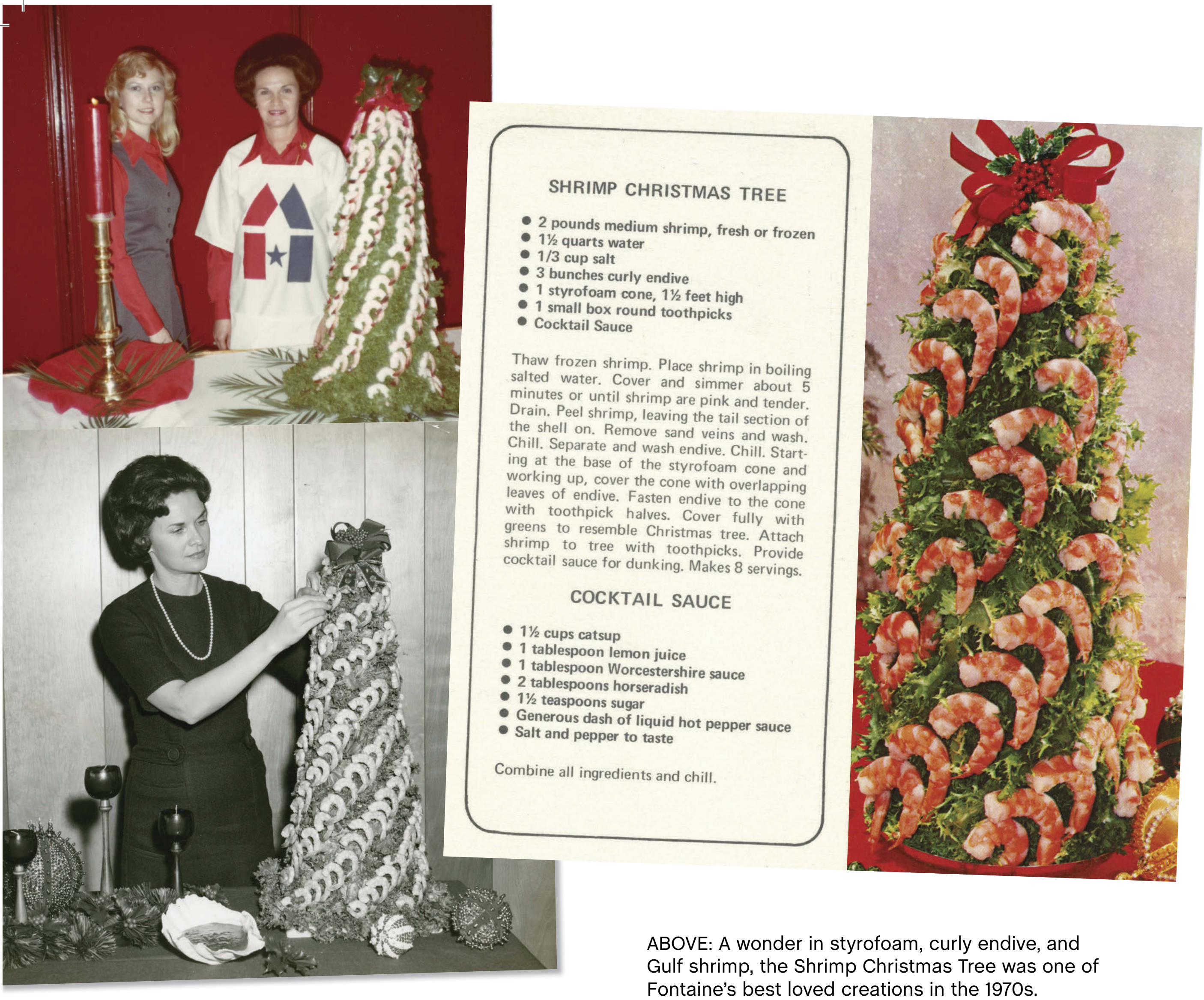
Photos provided by Becky Fontaine

> "Home economics EMERGED WITH A STARCHED-WHITE, scientific approach to kitchen efficiency AND NEW WAYS OF UNDERSTANDING THE CHANGING FOODSCAPE—A NEW KIND OF 'kitchen literacy.'"

WHEN BERTHA FONTAINE JOINED THE federal Bureau of Commercial Fisheries as a home economist in 1958, she went to work in the bureau's Exploratory Fishing and Gear Research Station in Pascagoula, Mississippi. She was Bertha Van Landingham then, twenty-nine years old, nearly a decade removed from her father's cotton farm in McCool by way of the Mississippi State College for Women and high school classrooms in Benoit and Pascagoula, where she taught home economics. For years to come, well after she married Douglass Fontaine and raised three children, former students would remember her erect bearing (she seemed taller than her five feet, five inches), her relentless attention to detail, her direct blue eyes, and her pointed, often terse focus. "Wait," they would say on meeting one of her children. "Your mother is Miss Van *Landingham*?"

The federal job brought her precise, meticulous nature out of the classroom and into a professional test kitchen two blocks from one of the busiest fishing ports in the country. Every lugger and diesel trawler that chuffed up the Pascagoula River—or into rivers and sounds near a score of fishing ports from Key West to Brownsville—brought to market thousands of pounds of croaker, grunt, grouper, ballyhoo, yellowfin, blue runner, red snapper, porgy, and bass. She was hired to develop recipes that would turn the catch into food people wanted to cook and eat. Every concise, orderly recipe that left her test kitchen listed fresh or frozen Gulf seafood first among the ingredients. Sometimes a recipe might require a specific variety, like the dressed red snapper for the red snapper en papillote or the two pounds of shark for the shark teriyaki. For the golden croaker in coral sauce, nothing but two pounds of pan-dressed golden croaker would do. Most of her recipes, though, simply listed fat fish or lean, frozen or fresh, enough for a home cook to feed six people or an institutional cook to feed one hundred. If she could get enough of those recipes into enough Southern kitchens, so the thinking went, people would buy more Gulf seafood and help change behavior that had stunted the growth and profitability of fisheries nationwide for decades: Americans ate barely a forkful of fresh seafood per capita each week.

Government experts, focused on securing the domestic food supply at least as much as assisting an anemic industry, had tried since the food panics of World War I to change that behavior. They focused their effort on educating America's



SHRIMP CHRISTMAS TREE

- 2 pounds medium shrimp, fresh or frozen
- 1½ quarts water
- 1/3 cup salt
- 3 bunches curly endive
- 1 styrofoam cone, 1½ feet high
- 1 small box round toothpicks
- Cocktail Sauce

Thaw frozen shrimp. Place shrimp in boiling salted water. Cover and simmer about 5 minutes or until shrimp are pink and tender. Drain. Peel shrimp, leaving the tail section of the shell on. Remove sand veins and wash. Chill. Separate and wash endive. Chill. Starting at the base of the styrofoam cone and working up, cover the cone with overlapping leaves of endive. Fasten endive to the cone with toothpick halves. Cover fully with greens to resemble Christmas tree. Attach shrimp to tree with toothpicks. Provide cocktail sauce for dunking. Makes 8 servings.

COCKTAIL SAUCE

- 1½ cups catsup
- 1 tablespoon lemon juice
- 1 tablespoon Worcestershire sauce
- 2 tablespoons horseradish
- 1½ teaspoons sugar
- Generous dash of liquid hot pepper sauce
- Salt and pepper to taste

Combine all ingredients and chill.

ABOVE: A wonder in styrofoam, curly endive, and Gulf shrimp, the Shrimp Christmas Tree was one of Fontaine's best loved creations in the 1970s.

home cooks, most often women, on the benefits of fresh seafood. At the same time, population shifts, packaged food, and industrial farming began to rupture the intimate connections Americans once had with their food. They often lived farther from their sources of food, knew less about those sources, relied less on their senses to evaluate food quality, and spent less time procuring and cooking their food. Home economics emerged with a starched-white, scientific approach to kitchen efficiency and new ways of understanding the changing foodscape—a new kind of "kitchen literacy," as one researcher phrased it. Yet no matter how artful the appeal to her creativity, no matter how flattering the appeal to her modern kitchen savvy, the consumer known to the marketing trade as "Mrs. American Housewife" simply could not be persuaded to buy fresh or frozen seafood for her family's table.

During her first decade on the job, working with a kitchen assistant from nearby Moss Point named Annie Richardson, Fontaine developed dozens of recipes in a test kitchen outfitted with all the appliances, utensils, crockery, and modern wonders the federal dime could provide. Her training and experience gave her the necessary knowledge and expertise. Martin's Seafood Market nearby (or the docks themselves, even closer) had every Gulf fish she'd care to try in a recipe. She traveled all over the South giving cooking demonstrations on television, in supermarkets, in schools. Her recipes—Grant Avenue fillets, angels on horseback, her famous shrimp Christmas tree—appeared in booklets, pamphlets, and cookbooks distributed throughout the South and beyond. When the federal government started tracking seafood consumption during the food panics of World War I, Americans ate about six pounds of fresh fish per person per year. When Fontaine began her work in 1958, they ate 5.7 pounds. In 1966, it was 5.9 pounds. She had been on the job nearly ten years, and not one thing had changed.

MARKETS FOR GULF SEAFOOD STRETCH back centuries. From their first years of settlement, Spaniards netted mullet along the Florida coast to feed the enslaved in Cuba, traveling the same routes the seagoing Calusa had used for their own mullet trade well before. Americans took over the mullet fishery after acquiring Florida from Spain in 1821, supplying Cuba while expanding it northward. In fishing camps stretching from Boca Ciega at the mouth of Tampa Bay to the Chandeleur Islands east of New Orleans, crews salted fish for the "country trade," and merchants carted them inland to the plantations and hardscrabble farms scattered through the wiregrass and pine flats of Alabama, Georgia, and northern Florida. Often, farmers would come to the coast themselves. They crowded the beach with their wagons and families and bartered corn, apples, beans, potatoes, eggs, butter, and salt for mullet still in the net.

In the latter half of the nineteenth century, small clusters of Filipino fishermen harvested shrimp from the bayous below New Orleans and dried them by the hundreds of barrels for sale in China. Loggerhead and green turtles, slaughtered in Tampa and Key West, wound up in soup factories and restaurants in New Jersey and New York. Fishermen in Mobile sold fresh and canned oysters as well as iced fish in small inland towns. Most of the fishermen in Mississippi sent their red snapper and shellfish to New Orleans for a brisk regional trade that extended up the Mississippi Valley to market stalls in St. Louis and hotels in Chicago. In Texas, demand from the state's hinterland for canned oysters and iced redfish, sheepshead, and whiting kept fishermen busy from Aransas Pass to Brownsville. So rich were the fishing grounds that Roderick Seal, a state lawmaker from Biloxi, stood in front of the Mississippi legislature at the close of the century and declared the Gulf of Mexico "God Almighty's meat house."

Beyond these specialized markets, however, few people cared about seafood from the Gulf of Mexico or anywhere else. Enzymes and bacteria normally checked by cold water found little impediment in early refrigeration techniques. As far as the eating public was concerned, fish stank. Shellfish, which eventually became the

ABOVE: Fontaine leads a seafood demonstration at Auburn Extension Service in Cullman, AL, in March 1968.

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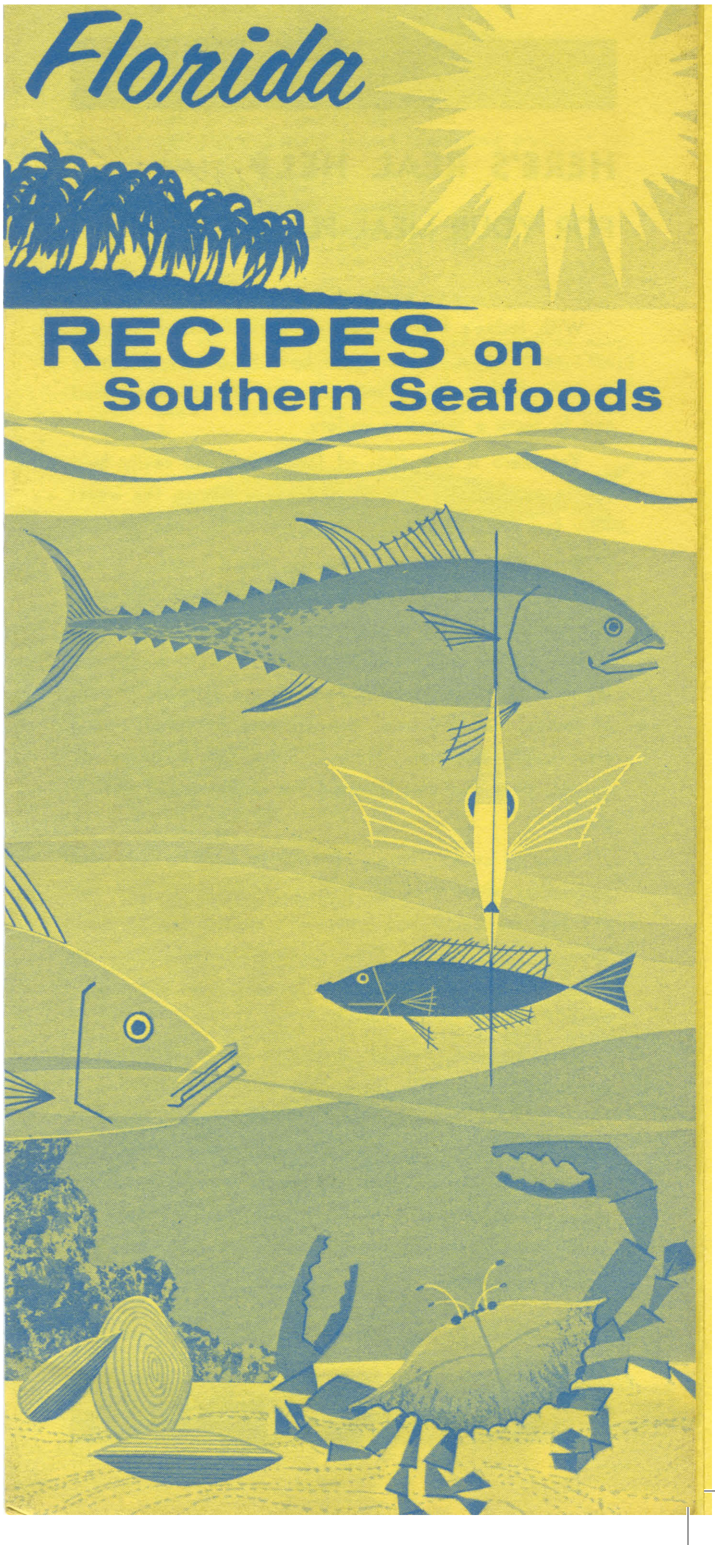
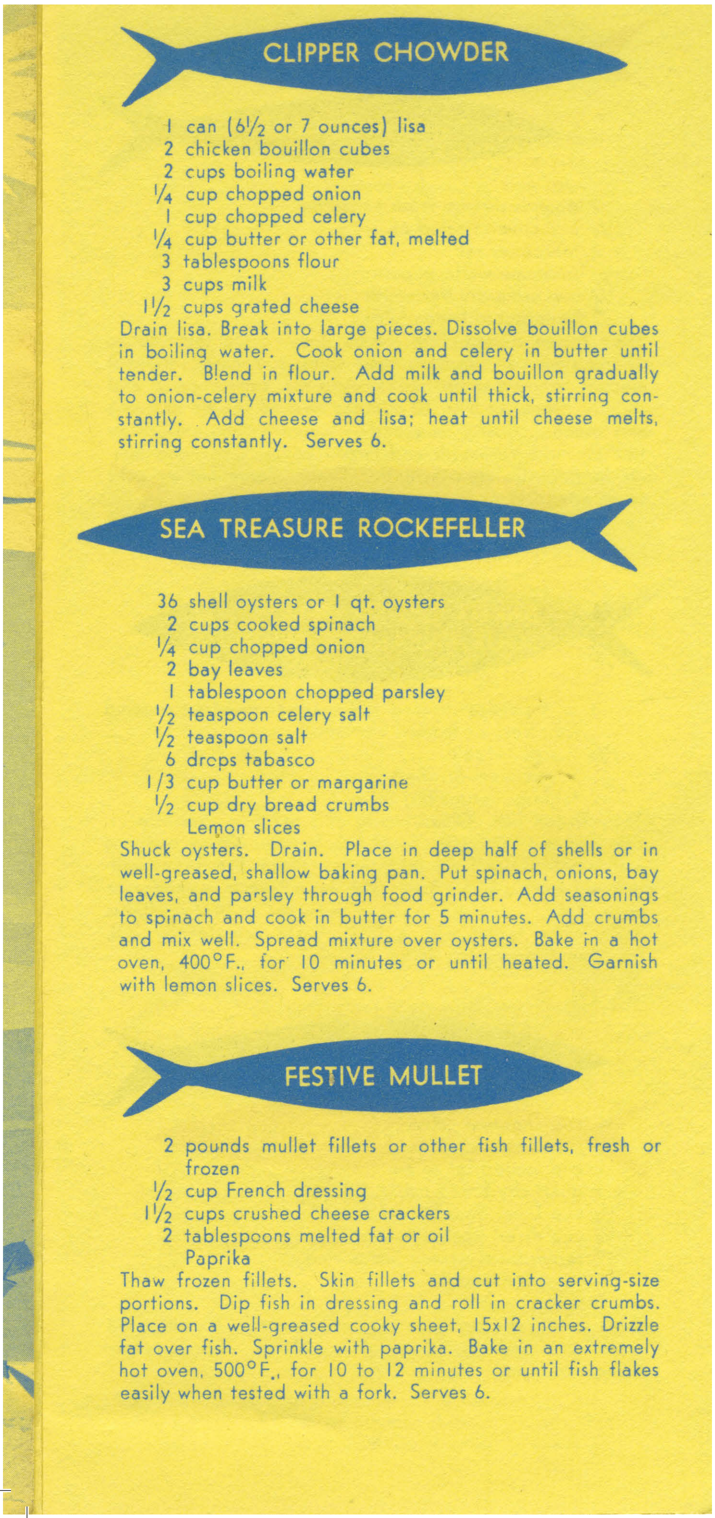
Gulf of Mexico's most lucrative catch, had to overcome other biases. At the turn of the century, most people considered shellfish of little table value, fit more for fertilizer or bait than human consumption. They were considered too rich to digest easily, and in some tellings might even have been poisonous. A *Good Housekeeping* article published in 1917 noted it "one of the curious paradoxes of human life that the United States produces more fish and better fish than any other seacoast nation, but eats less of them."

IN 1964, CONGRESS PASSED THE COMMERCial Fisheries Research and Development Act, and Bertha Fontaine finally got the break she needed. The law permitted business partnerships between the Bureau of Commercial Fisheries and states that wanted to promote seafood landed from their coasts. By 1966, some of the new federal and state cash went into Bertha Fontaine's budget, and she used it to hire more home economists and train them in her method of developing recipes. Television would be their secret weapon. By the late 1960s, a decade after Fontaine started her work, ninety-five out of every 100 homes in the country had a television set, and every urban center in the South had at least one television station, far more territory than Fontaine could cover on her own. Most stations had at least a live morning show and many a live midday show, perfect stages for seafood cooking demonstrations.

One or two at a time, her protégées came to Pascagoula from Florida, Georgia, Tennessee, Texas, even Mexico, where inland people were just as wary of seafood as inland Americans. For up to six weeks, they lived in the LaFont Inn, owned by Fontaine's husband, Douglass. Some days they would go to the waterfront to learn what happened when the seafood arrived on



the boat. Some days they'd go out on the boats themselves, but most of the time they stayed in the test kitchen and cooked seafood all day. Her test kitchen—clean, bright, and sanitized—operated as precisely and efficiently as a row of brass buttons. Nothing left for the wider world until it was as perfectly realized as they could make it. They were hired to promote seafood, a mission drilled into their heads from the first day, but nearly all of them were home economists like Fontaine, and they had a larger mission.



CLIPPER CHOWDER

1 can (6½ or 7 ounces) lisa
2 chicken bouillon cubes
2 cups boiling water
¼ cup chopped onion
1 cup chopped celery
¼ cup butter or other fat, melted
3 tablespoons flour
3 cups milk
1½ cups grated cheese

Drain lisa. Break into large pieces. Dissolve bouillon cubes in boiling water. Cook onion and celery in butter until tender. Blend in flour. Add milk and bouillon gradually to onion-celery mixture and cook until thick, stirring constantly. Add cheese and lisa; heat until cheese melts, stirring constantly. Serves 6.

SEA TREASURE ROCKEFELLER

36 shell oysters or 1 qt. oysters
2 cups cooked spinach
¼ cup chopped onion
2 bay leaves
1 tablespoon chopped parsley
½ teaspoon celery salt
½ teaspoon salt
6 drops tabasco
1/3 cup butter or margarine
½ cup dry bread crumbs
Lemon slices

Shuck oysters. Drain. Place in deep half of shells or in well-greased, shallow baking pan. Put spinach, onions, bay leaves, and parsley through food grinder. Add seasonings to spinach and cook in butter for 5 minutes. Add crumbs and mix well. Spread mixture over oysters. Bake in a hot oven, 400°F., for 10 minutes or until heated. Garnish with lemon slices. Serves 6.

FESTIVE MULLET

2 pounds mullet fillets or other fish fillets, fresh or frozen
½ cup French dressing
1½ cups crushed cheese crackers
2 tablespoons melted fat or oil
Paprika

Thaw frozen fillets. Skin fillets and cut into serving-size portions. Dip fish in dressing and roll in cracker crumbs. Place on a well-greased cooky sheet, 15x12 inches. Drizzle fat over fish. Sprinkle with paprika. Bake in an extremely hot oven, 500°F., for 10 to 12 minutes or until fish flakes easily when tested with a fork. Serves 6.

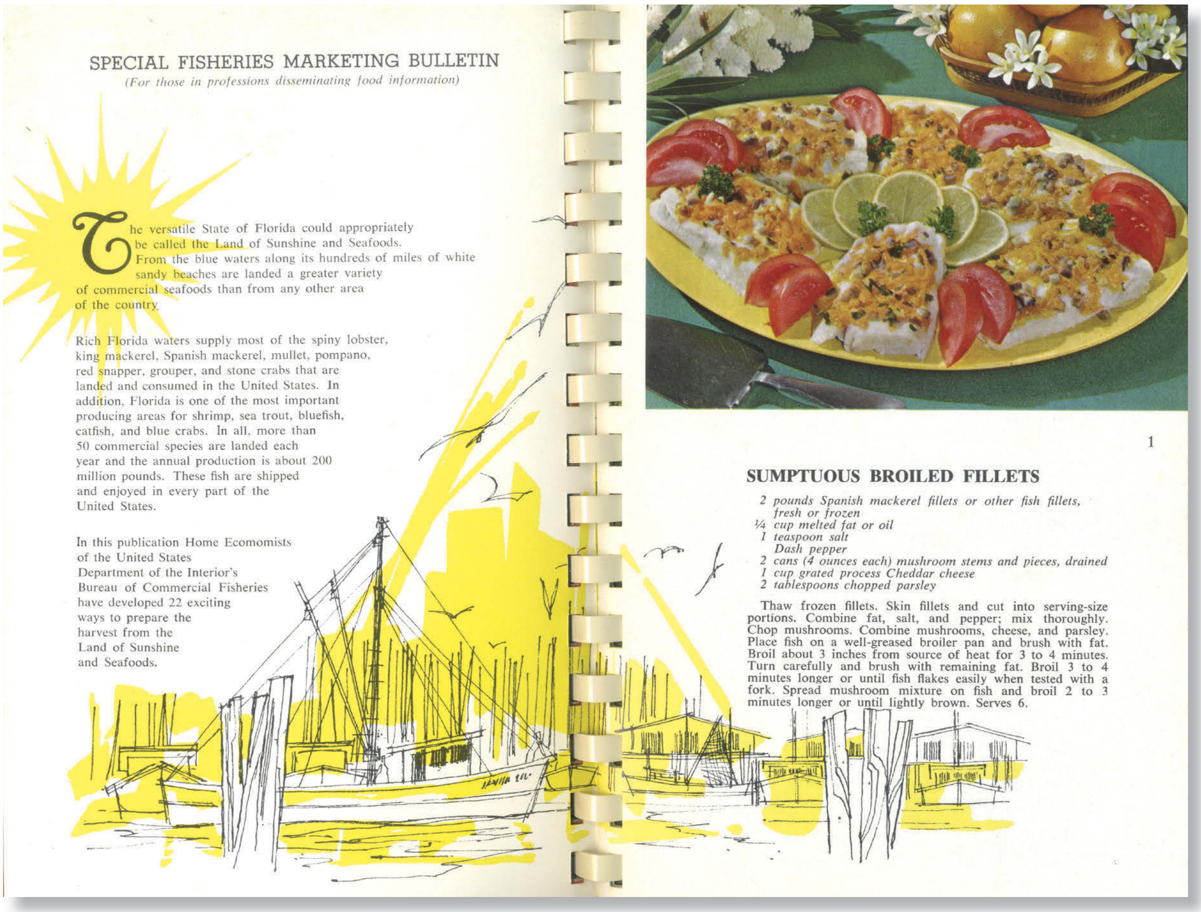
Millie Coleman (née Huff) of Atlanta was the second home economist hired for the enhanced program. "Rather than helping industry, it was about how to make better people," she said. "So the mission as I understood it was, 'Seafood is good for you.' Most people [didn't] know how to cook it. They waste their money if they don't know. So we're here to help you. We want you to taste the best thing you can possibly taste."

They hoped to get women comfortable with Gulf seafood in part by keeping things simple. Most of the ingredients in the recipes—rarely more than six or eight of them—women already knew about. Vinegar. Margarine. Sugar. Bread crumbs. Onions, cream cheese, noodles, sour cream, parsley, soy sauce, cloves, rice, bouillon cubes. Fontaine's recipes rarely contained anything more exotic than an avocado. If women didn't have these things on hand, they could be found at the grocer's. To make sure these commonplace ingredients did the job, every dish coming out of the kitchen had to pass one more test before it could go on the road. Actually three more.

Take the shark teriyaki, for instance. The recipe started, as they all did, with the fish. Two pounds of shark cut into one inch pieces. Then one can of pineapple chunks. Half a cup of soy sauce. From there, the recipe developed from trial and error. How much brown sugar? Two tablespoons or one? What about the ground ginger and the dry mustard? A teaspoon each? More? Not so much? Crushed garlic for sure, and one-inch squares of green pepper. Should they list mushrooms, cherry tomatoes, and onions as optional, or did the recipe need them at all? Any recipe worked through these kinds of questions, one batch after another trying combinations and flavors and intensities until, at last, they arrived at two versions.

Just outside the test kitchen, a room resembling a lunch counter served as the tasting room. Every time Fontaine and her protégés were ready to test a recipe, they prepared two batches to the specified six servings each. On shark teriyaki day, one batch might contain a teaspoon of ground ginger, the other a teaspoon of ground mace. Taste testers made up from the men and women who worked in the building, sometimes people passing by on Frederic Street, assembled in the tasting room and waited for the meal.

Well, not really a meal. They received an entrée plate inscribed with the letters "A" and "B," divided



SPECIAL FISHERIES MARKETING BULLETIN

(For those in professions disseminating food information)

The versatile State of Florida could appropriately be called the Land of Sunshine and Seafoods. From the blue waters along its hundreds of miles of white sandy beaches are landed a greater variety of commercial seafoods than from any other area of the country.

Rich Florida waters supply most of the spiny lobster, king mackerel, Spanish mackerel, mullet, pompano, red snapper, grouper, and stone crabs that are landed and consumed in the United States. In addition, Florida is one of the most important producing areas for shrimp, sea trout, bluefish, catfish, and blue crabs. In all, more than 50 commercial species are landed each year and the annual production is about 200 million pounds. These fish are shipped and enjoyed in every part of the United States.

In this publication Home Ecomomists of the United States Department of the Interior's Bureau of Commercial Fisheries have developed 22 exciting ways to prepare the harvest from the Land of Sunshine and Seafoods.

1

SUMPTUOUS BROILED FILLETS

2 pounds Spanish mackerel fillets or other fish fillets, fresh or frozen
¼ cup melted fat or oil
1 teaspoon salt
Dash pepper
2 cans (4 ounces each) mushroom stems and pieces, drained
1 cup grated process Cheddar cheese
2 tablespoons chopped parsley

Thaw frozen fillets. Skin fillets and cut into serving-size portions. Combine fat, salt, and pepper; mix thoroughly. Chop mushrooms. Combine mushrooms, cheese, and parsley. Place fish on a well-greased broiler pan and brush with fat. Broil about 3 inches from source of heat for 3 to 4 minutes. Turn carefully and brush with remaining fat. Broil 3 to 4 minutes longer or until fish flakes easily when tested with a fork. Spread mushroom mixture on fish and broil 2 to 3 minutes longer or until lightly brown. Serves 6.

by a red line with a version of the recipe on either side. That and a glass of water. No bread, no dessert. Each tester rated the versions on flavor, texture, and appearance, with ten values in each category ranging from excellent all the way down to inedible. A recipe had to score ninety out of a possible one hundred points in three separate taste tests before it went on the road.

TOWARD THE END OF THEIR TRAINING, Fontaine's protégées began to learn their professional bearing. "The Fontaine Finishing School," one civil servant called it. They learned public speaking, proper carriage, camera awareness, and speaking clearly for microphones. Because they'd have audiences, they learned how to perform their cooking demonstrations upside down and backward so the audience members could see it as they would if working in their own kitchens. For their final exam, they packed up their utensils and a load of seafood and drove the forty miles up US 90 to Mobile, where they performed a demonstration live on WKRG's *Woman's World* midday show, hosted by Connie Bea Hope and Estelle Payton. If they got through that, they were ready for the field.

Not that everything went according to plan. On one trip to Mobile, somebody forgot the avocado for the shrimp and avocado salad. Rather than drive back to Pascagoula—avocados weren't likely finds on their route—Fontaine stopped for cottage cheese and green food coloring to stir up a convincing on-screen dupe.

Compared to many other women working in those days, they had what appeared to be a glamorous job: a government car, an office, a secretary, the opportunity to travel, and a starting salary of ninety dollars a week. (By comparison, when Coleman finished her training and went to work in Atlanta, she roomed with a woman who made seventy-five dollars a week as an interior designer.) And they got to be on television. But they were on the road as much as fifty percent of the time, up before the sun to pack the dishes and utensils and pots and pans, the spices, the tablecloths, the set-dressing accessories like small fishing nets, miniature ship's wheels, models of fishing boats and drive a couple hundred miles to appear on a midday television show, stopping on the way to buy the fish for the demonstration. They'd hustle on to the set, give the demonstration, go through the talking points. Afterwards, they would wash dishes in the station bathroom. Then a hotel stay until the next morning, when they got up and did it all again.

Fontaine's relentless preparation and attention to detail left almost nothing to chance, but it also prepared her charges to handle the unexpected.

"I remember once in Bristol, Tennessee," Millie Coleman said. "It was foggy, I was late, I had a suitcase full of things. I had to get there quick. I opened a door that went right onto the set, and they were already live. I was standing there holding my suitcase on live TV. They just turned and said, 'And here she is.' So I just started doing it."

Slowly, the program seemed to start working. Similar federal test kitchens in College Park, Maryland, and in Seattle developed their own recipes, following the same format developed in Pascagoula. Women working in those regions appeared on their regional television programs with the same purpose.

By 1974, per capita consumption of seafood had increased to seven pounds. Two years after that, it was 8.3 pounds. By 2019, Americans consumed nearly twenty pounds of fresh or frozen fish and shellfish annually, a figure that by then included both wild-caught and farm-raised product. Bob Jones, until 2018 the executive director of the Southeastern Fisheries Association, had lobbied for the 1964 legislation that increased Fontaine's budget, and he has no doubt the program run by Fontaine and her colleagues in the other test kitchens worked.

"The government tracked how many people saw the TV spots, how many people read what the food editors were putting out, comparing it with the market for seafood," he said. "We saw the effects right away. We were doing festivals, publicity dinners, promotions on black drum, whiting, anything we could do. We were humping every day."

The National Oceanic and Atmospheric Association (NOAA) scaled back the marketing program as consumption increased but not without recognizing Fontaine's expertise and contributions to its success. She trained more than two dozen home economists and twice received outstanding performance awards. She worked with Alabama and North Carolina in launching their own seafood marketing programs, and she served as a consultant for Alcorn A&M University (now Alcorn State University). She worked with *Better Homes and Gardens* to develop a seafood cookbook, and her recipes were published in twenty federal publications. In 1971, Fontaine received NOAA's public service award for, as the citation read, "unusually significant contributions to the quality and effectiveness of NOAA's public service programs, contributions having such merit as to bring extraordinary credit to NOAA and the Department of Commerce." She died in November 1986, from injuries suffered in a fall at her home.

THE INGREDIENTS IN FONTAINE'S recipes seem mundane in a world where anything a home cook might need is an online order away. A grocery store these days without a selection of fresh scallops, snapper, tilapia, salmon, cod, or catfish is considered of little account. We know far more now about seafood, and about cooking in general, which means Fontaine's recipes are anything but museum pieces. A used copy of the pamphlet *Shrimp Tips from New Orleans*, for instance, sells for $4.95 on Amazon at this writing.

With an updated approach, the shrimp Creole dish with baked hushpuppies still works well a half-century after the test kitchen developed it. You start, of course, with a pound and a half of wild-caught shrimp, either from the Georgia coast or from the Gulf of Mexico. The recipe calls for oysters as well, but you won't go wrong simply adding more shrimp in their place. Baked hushpuppies are a whole lot less work and far fewer calories than the fried version. If you make a cool blender sauce to go with it, cut back on the mayo a little bit and thin the leftover sauce with buttermilk to use it later as a salad dressing. You can get organic green onions now, and organic fire-roasted tomatoes. Any reasonably stocked grocery store will have rice from all over the world, though Minute Rice still works just fine. You might want a little more than the two cups the recipe calls for so you can get seven good portions out of it, a pretty good dent in the twenty pounds of seafood you'll eat this year.

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