



Dollie Johnson cooked for President Benjamin Harrison in the early 1890s.

what that's about. Swedish and Irish women were running the White House kitchen. Then you get to FDR, and there was a run of black cooks for quite a while. Truman and Eisenhower have white chefs, and Eisenhower had a Filipino chef as well, Pedro Udo.

**A Filipino chef!**

His son is still alive; I'm trying to get in touch with him so I can interview him. But Jacqueline Kennedy was not feeling Udo because he was a military cook. She changed the standard to European food from European-trained chefs. That started a thirty-year run of European chefs running the White House kitchen. It was interrupted briefly because LBJ and the French cook that Kennedy hired didn't get along, so he quit. LBJ brought his family cook, Zephyr Wright.

**You write about the peculiar balance of the special connections these cooks had with the presidents they served, and the subjugated role these men and**

**women often experienced in society.**

Even though these presidents weren't interested in improving the status of black people overall, I found these wonderful expressions of genuine sentiment between the presidents and their staff—celebrating family births, giving anniversary gifts. Some of these African American professionals named their kids after presidents they worked for. Presidents attended the funerals and were moved by the deaths of these cooks. You hear about deathbed farewells. It doesn't square with the dynamics of the time.

**Did your aim in writing this book change in the process?**

When I started, it was about my curiosity. Then I became fueled by a fierce determination to make sure these people got adequate due. I want to correct the record and possibly be a springboard for deeper scholarship about this aspect of the presidency. I'm not going to lie: At times I was angry. I'd read the sources and I'd figure out the role that an African American played in a situation, and it's stunning to me that they're not even mentioned.

**It underscores the arguments about culinary justice and attribution.**

I was definitely thinking about that. This is one of the most stunning examples of the need for balance, to bring to light what these folks actually did. I think these African American cooks gave our presidents a window on black life. A lot of presidents chose not to open that window, but because of the ones who did, I think our country is better for it. 🍷

Adrian Miller is also the author of *Soul Food: The Surprising Story of an American Cuisine, One Plate at a Time*.

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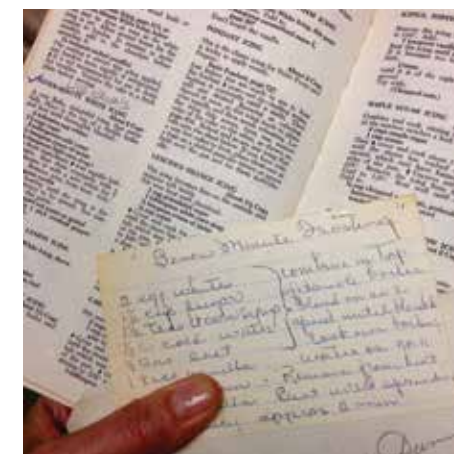
Photos by Jennifer Justus

# DIRTY PAGES

My ex's favorite icing

AS TOLD TO  
JENNIFER JUSTUS  
BY MINDY MERRELL

*Dirty pages are the messiest recipes in our collections. Dusted with cocoa powder and ringed with coffee stains, handed down from family or shared by friends, they offer good instructions and deliver the best stories. Dirty Pages, the ongoing recipe exhibit, launched in Nashville in 2015, a collaboration with Erin Byers Murray and Cindy Wall. The series peeks into the homes of cooks across the South. In this installment for Gravy, we hear from food writer Mindy Merrell, who still makes her ex-husband's grandmother's frosting. She stores the recipe between the pages of her grandmother's 1964 paperback edition of Joy of Cooking. — JENNIFER JUSTUS*



## Recipe Box

**T**HIS JULY, ON MY FORMER husband's birthday, I'll once again make his favorite angel food cake with fluffy white icing. It's the classic cake his maternal grandmother, Nana, made every year when he was a child. I've been making it for him for about thirty years. The last fifteen or so we haven't even been married.

Cary Dunn, a native of Newport News, Virginia, is a reserved guy who doesn't gush about his childhood, but he gushes about this cake. He'll tell you how the billowy icing develops a thin, crispy crust in dry air and how it shatters to reveal soft insides. He knows every stage of icing according to that particular birthday's humidity. Don't make a lemon curd filling with the left-over egg yolks or garnish the cake with fresh raspberries. Cary wants his cake minimalist, pure, and white. Doesn't that sound just like an architect?

My early icing attempts weren't always successful. Cary was nice about those grainy years. Not long before she died, Nana handed me an index card with the handwritten recipe. I learned that I



needed to make the icing over a hot water bath to keep the sugar syrup from crystalizing. For this recipe, I trade my stand mixer for a little handheld number. Nailing this icing still makes me do a victory dance in the kitchen. It's a food science marvel.

I like making what we call "the cake." The whole family eats it, but Cary owns it. His continued friendship is a good excuse to keep baking it, and more than that, it's a way to share our kids' Virginia roots with them. Maybe when they're older they will make the cake, too. 🍷

### Mindy's take on NANA'S SEVEN-MINUTE WHITE ICING

2 egg whites  
1 1/2 cups sugar  
1/3 cup water  
Small squirt of corn syrup (about 1 1/2 teaspoons)  
1/4 teaspoon cream of tartar  
Pinch of salt  
1 teaspoon vanilla

Combine all ingredients, except the vanilla, in the top of a double boiler or in a stainless steel mixing bowl set over a saucepan of boiling water. Beat with an electric hand mixer for 7 minutes.

Remove the icing from the heat and add the vanilla.

Continue beating until the icing cools slightly, has a thick spreading consistency, and can hold onto the cake, about 2-3 minutes longer.

Spread a thin layer all over the cake to set the crumbs. Add a second thick layer.

# GRAVY

Gravy is a publication of the Southern Foodways Alliance, a member-supported institute of the Center for the Study of Southern Culture at the University of Mississippi.

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**THE MISSION** of the Southern Foodways Alliance is to document, study, and explore the diverse food cultures of the changing American South.

Our work sets a welcome table where all may consider our history and our future in a spirit of respect and reconciliation.

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