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*

I GREW UP IN MONROVIA, LIBERIA, in West Africa, under the guidance of my grandmother. She was a chef and an entrepreneur herself, and I learned everything that I know today from her. I came to the United States in 1980 by way of a civil war in Liberia. I moved to Richmond, Virginia, in 1986, and I've been here since.

Liberia was founded in the 1800s by freed slaves. The first president of Liberia was born in Petersburg, Virginia, and the founder of Liberia, Lott Cary, was born in Charles City, Virginia. So the ties with Virginia and Liberia are very close.

My grandmother took me under her wings when I was nine years old and started training me to cook. She made me love it, and she made me care about it, and she made food a part of me and as an art. She used to have these terms: "You have to get to know your pot." "You have to fall in love with your pot."

And so because I was like her, I would be in the kitchen, just dancing. *"You gets to know your pot."* I'd be teasing her.

My grandmother said the art of cooking is smelling. It's the key. You have to be able to identify all of these different spices by the smell. And then from there, you can go to what it tastes like. But if you can identify peppermint or identify oregano or parsley in the food, you can almost separate those smells when the food sits in front of you. You can say, "Mm, this has too much oregano in it," because it's stronger than all of the other spices in there. And that's one of the things I learned with my grandmother.

The war broke in 1980 in my country, and I was fortunate to get out. I was working at a hotel in New York City, and I had a friend who lived in Richmond. I came to visit her one weekend and just loved it. And one of the reasons why I decided to stay in Richmond: It reminded me of Liberia a lot. There are a lot of places in Richmond that look just like Liberia. For example, we have Broad Street in Monrovia; we have Broad Street here. Liberia is kind of built like the South, and the people were very friendly, just like at home. It just felt so real for me.

In 1996 I opened my first business, which was hair braiding. But my ultimate goal was not to braid hair. I was just doing it to survive. It was the fastest way to make some money. So I just did it.



But my ultimate goal was cooking. I knew that at some point it was going to evolve into that, but I just didn't know how.

I started cooking food out of my house just for customers. They would come to get their hair braided and they would be sitting with me for six, seven hours, and I would offer them something to eat. And they would be like, "Oh what is this?"

And I would explain it to them. "This is spinach and rice and this and that." So I found myself cooking at home for my customers and their families. And then it just started growing. I was doing twenty-five, thirty dinners, because my customers started telling people, "She cooked this stuff. I don't know what it was, but it was so nice."

In 1998, the health department contacted me and said, "Okay, if you want to do this, you need to get a license." I went and bought a few pots, a few little things I needed. I got all my customers to help me do hand-printed flyers, and they started passing it on in their jobs for lunch. And all of the sudden, Chef MaMusu West African Cuisine took off. It was the first West African restaurant in the entire state of Virginia.

It was foreign to the customers. So everybody was excited about this new African restaurant, but I had a challenge. I couldn't really cook traditional African dishes, because I first had to educate them. So I decided to find a middle ground. I said, "Okay I'm going to take Southern dishes and use African spices."

I pray as I cook, and I sing. I just enjoy this. This is really who I am. I believe that if I had to die today, I would come back the same way. There isn't anything else I want to be. I can't even envision myself doing anything else, because I love this art so much.

*PHOTO, PAGE 11 by Sara Wood.*