THE RECIPE BOOK

How Family Stories Simmer Through Generations

INGREDIENTS

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For as long as I can remember, on Thanksgiving and Christmas, my family would pack into a car and drive nearly 100 miles to spend the holidays at my Great Aunt's house – a place that always felt magical. Her house was a time capsule filled with photos of children, cousins, nieces, and nephews. I remember seeing pictures of my Nana and asking what year they were from, alongside pictures from my mom's senior prom, the high school senior portraits I gave her, and how they had a reserved spot on the fireplace alongside everyone else in the family. However, the best part was when everyone finally arrived, and we gathered for a large family meal where we got to pick from gumbo, collard greens, turkey, you name it! This tradition sadly halted in 2021 when my Aunt passed. I remember feeling an overwhelming mix of sadness, grief, and frustration. So many things were going on in my head, and though I knew she had passed peacefully and lived a long, fruitful life, I remember how her age kept ringing in my mind. She was 89...three months away from turning 90, and I was sure she'd pull through. So much history was stored in her house, and I felt empty knowing that nearly a century of stories, memories, laughs, and more had gone on with her that night. So many questions I didn't think of asking, stories untold, that I would only think to appreciate now that it was too late.

Her absence made me think and reassess my immediate family's history and realize the things I've taken for granted. I found myself asking my Nana about the '60s and my mom about the '80s; I was obsessed with hearing how things were back then and the changes they lived through·· and yet I still wasn't satisfied. Something felt like it was missing. Yes, I was absorbing the information, but there

was absorbing the information, but there was a disconnect. It wasn't until nearly three years later that I realized my quest to preserve my family's histories and stories was right before me. Each year, as the holidays came and went and we made new traditions without Aunt Bobby, I found myself more absorbed by spending time in the kitchen. I wanted to see and learn how the food I have fond memories of eating came together, and though I would pester my Nana about her recipes and how she believed in measuring with the soul and not teaspoons, I found myself recording everything. I wanted to make a recipe book with all of the food I grew up eating so it could continue to be passed down, and this is where everything felt like it fell into place for me.

In this quest to preserve and archive what my family had lived through, I failed to realize that I was already doing that somehow. When I'd ask my family about the dishes they remember or stories that involve food, I didn't realize I was getting snippets of the past in each of their memories. My mom had shared her fond memories of being in the kitchen with her grandmother and how she'd always let my mom's creativity thrive. In one instance, my mom found herself cutting and rolling out biscuit dough, deep frying it, and then dusting it with powdered sugar, resulting in her making homemade donuts. My great-grandfather, who happened to be a seaman chef, could cook anything. My mom would share stories of her asking him for sweet treats, and she'd watch in awe as he'd make an apple pie from scratch without needing to measure or look at a recipe book, and it'd all come together right before her eyes. I remember hearing stories of how my Nana grew up using sweetened condensed milk in oatmeal or canned chicken in soups and chicken salad because it was cheaper, but the memories are still fond. Or how my Great Uncle Jay taught my mom to make scrambled eggs with canned crab meat, and it wasn't til many years later that we found out that was his comfort meal while incarcerated. I was so eager to learn these stories and how within the food that was created, fond memories were formed as well.

My quest for understanding my family's story was unknowingly right in front of me all along. In the black community, I know there's a rich history of food and what it means to my family, and I've always taken this for granted. I never really stopped to admire how my enslaved ancestors could take meager rations and unwanted food and turn it into something that resembles home to them, and even now, hearing stories from recent family members that even when times were hard, there was still laughter and joy shared. When I think back to my childhood, I have warm memories spent in the kitchen with my nana, helping her bake cakes, and how, in more recent history, she's taught me how to make her signature cookies or the 7-Up cake that everyone in my family loves. Even now, when my nieces and nephews ask us to bake cupcakes, and I teach them how to crack eggs, I feel at peace knowing that these memories will continue to be passed down one way or another.