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Editor's Note:

As the old English ballad goes, "Christmas comes but once a year," bringing with it a myriad of traditions, emotions, and celebrations. Among all the diversity lies some mighty good eating. Some of the best dishes in the history of cuisine resulted from the hands and imaginations of people tasked with cooking for this feast day. One can only imagine the challenge in the days before refrigeration and "instant" foods and everything else!

This issue of *The Virginia Culinary Thymes* spotlights Christmas, but only touches upon a few tiny fragments of the great traditions associated with the holiday. Even a cursory glance at Addison, Virginia Tech's library's online catalog, reveals the wealth of material available for scholars and others interested in how Christmas evolved over the centuries and what dishes people ate at what times during those centuries.

And that is what drives the Peacock-Harper Culinary History Committee in its commitment to the study of food history, just how people think about food, as well as how they cook various recipes and present the end results of those endeavors.

The goal of the Peacock-Harper Culinary History Collection is as follows:

"To keep alive knowledge pertaining to the culinary history of Virginia, the United States, and the world, for future generations by gathering together cookbooks and other food-related materials into an accessible collection designed for research, study, and just plain enjoyment."

Note that call numbers in brackets follow book titles owned by Virginia Tech libraries.

~ Cindy Bertelsen, Editor

Eggnog

Eggnog and the winter holidays – they go together like Thanksgiving and turkey or Easter and painted eggs. Ever wondered about the history of this silky smooth, decadently delicious elixir that goes down so effortlessly that another just naturally follows? And why do we enjoy eggnog pretty much *only* during this time of year?

More than likely we can thank our English forbearers. Although our English ancestors may not have served eggnog as we know it, it's probably a descendent of a hot British drink called *posset*, which was a mixture of eggs, milk and ale or wine. When the English colonists settled in America, they brought it across the seas, but added rum and bourbon, which were the readily available spirits in the *new* world.

The word “noggin” means a small cup. “Nog” is also an old English term for ale, dating to the 1600s, according to *The Dictionary of American Food and Drink*, by John F. Mariani. *Posset* was also known as an *egg flip*, so it's understandable how it segued into eggnog.

Eggs were considered a comfort food, a medicinal food. Often served when folks were ill, eggs were thought to speed up the patient's recovery. It's understandable why nutrient-rich eggnog was served during the cold winter months, because the beverage had a warming, soothing effect, much appreciated after a frosty journey on

horseback or in an open carriage. In early colonial times, when people stayed close to home during the cold months, the winter holidays were the exception. Folks traveled, as we do today, to visit relatives and friends, except it was from farm to farm or farm to town. A cup of rejuvenating eggnog was just the thing to comfort a chilly guest.

Let's not forget that eggs were in short supply during the long dark days when hens laid fewer eggs. Eggs were stored to last through the winter, and were very dear as the winter progressed. Sharing eggs for this beverage was probably a sign of friendship and affluence.

The tradition of serving eggnog from a large bowl got its roots from the Wassail Bowl – a huge bowl, often made of wood, which contained a hot, spiced liquor. The custom of floating toasted bread on top led to the expression ‘to propose a toast’. Some recipes for Wassail sound like hot, spiced and spiked cider, while others contain eggs, ale and lots of spices.

In any event, no respectable winter holiday gathering would be without a bowl of frothy eggnog. The grocery dairy case offers a quick solution, but careful preparation for the home-made stuff is always worth the effort. Consuming raw eggs in these salmonella-conscious days is a no-no, so a cooked version is a must. You basically thicken the eggs in steaming milk, pasteurizing them as you go. Then chill it down and keep it cold by serving small batches in your prettiest pitcher on a festive tray or in a small punch bowl. Floating ice cream on top keeps the

beverage cool and makes it creamier as it melts. Here is a really quick, easy, and delicious *microwave* recipe for eggnog.

Microwave Eggnog

Makes 10 servings

6 eggs
¼ cup sugar
1 quart milk, divided
1 teaspoon vanilla
Garnishes or stir-ins

In a 2-quart bowl, beat together eggs and sugar until thoroughly blended. Set aside. Heat 2 cups of milk on full power until bubbles form at edges, about 5 to 6 minutes. Stir into egg mixture. Cook this on 50% power until mixture is thick enough to coat a metal spoon with a thin film and reaches at least 160°F, about 5 to 6 minutes. Stir in remaining 2 cups milk and vanilla. Chill. Serve in small cups, garnished with ground nutmeg, ice cream, whipped cream, brandy, rum, or whisky.

Egg Cookbooks

Classic egg dishes. Park Ridge, IL :
American Egg Board, [1970?]
[TX745 .C53 1970]

Consumer and Food Economics
Institute. *Eggs in Family Meals :
A Guide for Consumers.* [Slightly
rev. Jan. 1975] [Washington,
D.C.] : U.S. Dept. of Agriculture,
1975. [S21 .A8 no.103 1975]

*VEggs; The Fine art of Egg, Omelet, and
Soufflé Cooking.* Edited by Carol
D. Brent. [1st ed.] Chicago,
Tested Recipe Publishers; book
trade distribution by Doubleday,

Garden City, N.Y. [1970]
[TX745 .E44 1970]

Feinman, Jeffrey. *The Fabulous EGG
Cookbook.* Ventura, 1978.

Hazelton, Nika Standen. *Eggs! The
Greatest of Egg Dishes.* New
York : Simon and Schuster,
[1969] [TX745 .H35 1969]

Pappas, Lou Seibert. *The Elegant
Economical Egg Cookbook.* San
Francisco : 101 Productions ;
New York : distributed by
Scribner, c1976. [TX745 .P36
1976]

Siegel, Helen. *The Totally Eggs
Cookbook.* Celestial Arts, 1997.

Simmons, Mari. *The Good Egg: More
Than 200 Fresh Approaches
from Soup to Dessert.* New York:
Houghton Mifflin, 2000.

Virginia. Dept. of Agriculture and
Commerce. *How to Enjoy
Virginia Eggs in the Old
Dominion Tradition.* Richmond :
The Dept., [1978?] [TX745 .V57
1978]

White, Loretta. *The Good Egg.* New
York : Rand McNally, [1959]
[TX745 .W5 1959]

Submitted by Mary Rapoport

Christmas in South Carolina— As I Remember

Christmas at our home was a
time for lots of relatives and lots of



food. My Mother and her helper, Rene, worked for several days to ready the food for Christmas Day. There certainly was no thought of calories for my Mother tried to have a favorite food of each family member and lots of extra for the aunts and uncles who appeared all during the day.

There was no shopping for presents until Christmas Eve. By some means, there were always presents for everyone but simple compared to presents of today. Each of us, as children, always received one favorite toy gift and the other gifts were usually something new to wear. As I look back to what Santa brought, there was always a stocking filled with peppermint sticks, fruit and nuts; this was what my Dad had received as a child and he continued that tradition. A Christmas tree was cut from a friend's farm and brought in for decorating on Christmas Eve.

Sometimes my Dad would bring in a "skinny" tree and all the children wanted him to get a better tree; however, after we decorated any of his selections, there was lots of excitement when the lights were on for the first time.

As I remember the Christmas Menu, it was always the same. The foods prepared were as follows:

Roast Turkey/Gravy, Dressing, and Dumplings; Baked Fresh Ham; Sweet Potato Soufflé; Potato Salad; Green Beans; Rice; Fruit Salad; Cranberry Sauce; Deviled Eggs; Green Peas; Biscuits; Cornbread; and the Desserts—Coconut(Fresh)Cake, Japanese Fruit Cake, Chocolate Layer Cake, Hermit Cake [see recipe below—Ed.], Fruit Cake; Coffee and Iced Tea.

When the food was put away in the pantry and covered with a tablecloth for the next serving, the women cleaned the kitchen and visited, while all the men in the family sat with their cigars and talked about their topics. The children were busy with their new toys.

Every thing now seems so simple to me, but I remember the Day as a happy time for all the family.

Hermit Cake

Serves 15

1 pound butter
1 teaspoon vanilla extract
1 3/4 pounds brown sugar
6 eggs
1 1/2 pounds flour
1 teaspoon baking powder
1 teaspoon cinnamon
1 pound English walnuts, chopped
2 boxes pitted dates, chopped
1 large lemon (lemon, juice and grated rind)
(Use apple wedges in center to store cake)

Cream butter and sugar; add well-beaten eggs. Sift dry ingredients and mix with fruit, nuts, and lemon rind. Add alternately with lemon juice and rind; then add vanilla extract. Pour into

greased and floured tube pan. Bake at 325 degrees for 2 hours.

Cool cake; cut apple wedges and place in the center; wrap tightly in foil; and store in tightly closed tin. Change apple wedges every 3 or 4 days to keep the cake moist.

South Carolina Cookbooks

Burger, Anne. *South Carolina: Always in Season: A Recipe Collection*. Kuttawa, Kentucky : McClanahan Publishing House, 2002.

(Ann Burger is an award winning food editor for Charleston's The Post and Courier.)

Kiefer, Jan. *A South Carolina Christmas*. Englewood, Colo. : Westcliffe Publishers, 1997.

The New South Carolina Cookbook. Edited by [South Carolina Family and Community Leaders](#). Columbia : University of South Carolina Press, 1997.

Rutledge, Sarah. *The Carolina Housewife*. Columbia : University of South Carolina Press, 1979. (First published in 1847.) [TX715 .R975 1979]

South Carolina Cook Book; A Collection of Recipes. Edited by members, State Home Demonstration Dept. Columbia : University of South Carolina Press, 1954. [TX715 .S67843 1954]

Submitted by Jean Robbins

Feast of the Seven Fishes: An Italian Christmas Tradition



Christmas in Italy is a delightful, family-oriented time bursting with many culinary traditions and a

long history. One of the most delicious traditions is the Christmas Eve “Feast of the Seven Fishes.” Home cooks, cooks in noble households, and nuns in convents all contributed to the culinary richness of the *cenone*, as this supper is also called.

Christmas as the modern Western world celebrates it essentially began in Italy. In ancient Rome, the period ranging from the mid-December to the beginning of January was a time of festivals and revelry. The selection of the date for Christmas appears to be rooted in the 274 A.D. decision of Roman Emperor Aurelian, who declared that December 25 as *natalis solis invicti* (birth of the invisible sun). Interestingly enough, in the Julian calendar, December 25 was the winter solstice.

Due to the emergence of Christianity over various pagan sun-worshipping sects, and as Christianity became stronger in the third and fourth centuries, early Roman Christians usurped December 25 as the feast day for the birth of Christ, imbuing it with Biblical symbolism related to the sun as well.

Down through the centuries, beginning in the seventh century, the Roman Catholic Church decreed that the

eve of Christmas (or *vigilia*) be a *giorno di magro* or “lean day.” Since meatless days demanded a certain ingenuity, cooks rolled up their sleeves and developed some of the most inventive dishes associated with the holy days. And most of those dishes featured fish.

Home cooks naturally produced recipes for the *giorni di magro*, because most peasants and poor people ate a plant-based diet day in and day out. So it was in the cuisine of the noble households and the convents, where women from the noble classes tended to predominate, that the traditional Christmas Eve *vigilia* recipes began.

Although Italy became one nation in the 1800s, it is still a place defined culinarily more by region than by one all-encompassing repertoire of recipes. Some regions lay seven fish courses on the table for the *vigilia*, while others insist on three, nine, or even thirteen courses.*

According to Michele Scicolone, in her book *Italian Holiday Cooking*, this much-touted Italian tradition of eating seven fish dishes on Christmas Eve no longer occurs in Italy as much as it did in the past. And in some parts of Italy it never happened at all. The fish-based *vigilia* appears to have been a tradition peculiar to southern Italy. Two dishes in particular seem to predominate, regardless of the region: *I Capitone* (Big Eel, roasted or fried) and *baccalà* or salt cod in some form.

So why is this tradition so deeply entrenched in Italian-American homes? The most likely explanation is that most Italian immigrants came from the southern regions of Italy. Even in

modern Naples, where many immigrants originated, the question of how many fish courses just brings a shrug of the shoulders or at worst, a blank stare, indicating that, like many customs, it died out along time ago in its place of origin. In a way, the Feast of Seven Fishes represents a time-warp.

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As with so many ethnic food-related customs in the United States (think of Norwegian lefse and lutefisk!), the Feast of the Seven Fishes connects families with a past that gets murkier with every generation. The following menu, eaten over several hours and keeping everyone engaged and occupied until midnight Mass, illustrates just one approach to this Italian culinary treasure:

- Christmas Spaghetti with Walnuts and Anchovies, Topped with Breadcrumbs
- *I Capitone* or Fried Christmas Cod, served with tomato sauce enlivened with olives, golden raisins, and pine nuts
- Torta with Fish and Escarole
- Fried Eel
- Linguine with Clam Sauce
- Seafood Salad, with marinated shrimp, scallops, and squid
- Christmas Broccoli (broccoli rabe with garlic and anchovies) or *I Cardoni* (fried Jerusalem artichokes)

Following this huge feast comes a huge plateful of Italian cookies, *panettone*, and other traditional sweets like the honey-saturated *Struffoli*, honey being a pre-Christian treat associated with the winter solstice. After the grand *cenone*, again in line with tradition, families amble off to midnight Mass.

And thus the children form memories of family and community that will never leave them. That's how tradition stays alive, thankfully.

* Three may refer to the Three Wise Men and this is the number of courses served in many of Italy's landlocked regions; seven may symbolize the seven sacraments of the Church, Christ's seven utterances from the cross, the seven gifts of the Holy Spirit, in honor of the seven champions of Christendom; nine are associated with the Trinity time three or the nine months of Mary's gestation; and thirteen might signify the Apostles plus Jesus.

Italian holiday-related modern cookbooks

Batali, Mario. *Holiday Food*. New York : Clarkson Potter, 2000.

Bianchi, Anna. *Italian Festival Food: Recipes and Traditions from Italy's Regional Country Food Fairs*. New York : Macmillan, 1999.

Esposito, Mary Ann. *Celebrations Italian Style: Recipes and Menus for Special Occasions and Seasons of the Year*. New York : William Morrow, 1995.

Field, Carol. *Celebrating Italy: The Tastes and Traditions of Italy Revealed Through its Feasts, Festivals, and Sumptuous Foods*. New York : William Morrow, 1990.

Gaziano, Rosalie Fuscaldo. *Seasons & Celebrations: Cooking Secrets of Italian Villages Deliciously*

Translated for the American Table. Gretna, Louisiana : Pelican Publishing Company, 1984.

Germano, Robert A. *The Eve of the Seven Fishes: Christmas Cooking in the Peasant Tradition*. New York : iUniverse, Inc., 2005.

Granieri, Lori. *Italian-American Holiday Traditions: Celebrations and Family Entertainment*. New York : Citadel Press, 2002.

Scicolone, Michele. *Italian Holiday Cooking: A Collection of 150 Treasured Recipes*. New York : William Morrow, 2001.

Submitted by Cynthia Bertelsen

Book Reviews and News

There was an obit for Cecily Brownstone, a food writer for AP, in the *Roanoke Times* a month or so ago. From 1947 until 1986, Ms. Brownstone wrote two columns a week on cuisine, each containing five recipes, or over an estimated 14,200 articles. The Peacock-Harper Collection holds one of her cookbooks, *Cecily Brownstone's Associated Press Cookbook*. [TX715 .B8495 1972]

The November 24 issue of *The Roanoke Times* carried an article regarding Ruth Siems, who died November 13. Ms. Siems's claim to fame was as one of the inventors of Stove Top™ stuffing. Ruth Siems earned an undergraduate degree from Purdue University in 1953 and after graduation took a job with General

Foods. She first worked on flours and cake mixes at the Evansville plant, but later moved to the company's technical center in Tarrytown, NY.

General Foods was awarded the patent for Stove Top™, generically called Instant Stuffing Mix, in 1975. Siems is listed first among the inventors.

The secret lay in the crumb size--too small resulted in a soggy mass; too large, and the result was gravel. Siems was instrumental, according to her sister Suzanne Porter, in finding the precise crumb size--about the size of a pencil eraser.

Kraft Foods, which now owns the brand, sells about 60 million boxes of Stove Top at Thanksgiving. But the convenience of preparing stuffing in less than five minutes without a turkey has made it a popular side dish year round.

The Roanoke Times also ran a review of *Finding Betty Crocker: The Secret Life of America's First Lady of Food*, by Susan Marks. [TX649 .C76 M37 2005]. Harriet Little wrote the review and the following comes from that review.. Betty Crocker was invented in 1921 by the company that marketed Gold Medal Flour™. Company officials chose the name because they thought Betty was a cheerful name and Crocker was a recently retired company director. Most people believed Betty Crocker to be a real person, but she was actually a large staff of home economists that shared advice, tested recipes, gave cooking demonstrations, and taught classes to appreciative consumers.

Little's review concludes, "The

book is fascinating for people interested in American food and cooking, of course, but it's also an important study of American trends during interesting and trying times."

Betty Crocker's Picture Cook Book has sold more than 30 million copies since it was first published in 1950. There are several copies in the Peacock-Harper Collection, including the 1950 edition [TX715 C9214 1950]. In addition the Collection contains three-dozen Betty Cocker titles, including *Good and Easy Cook Book*; *The Bisquick Cookbook*; *Microwave Cookbook*; and *New Dinner for Two*. The oldest Betty Crocker item is *Picture Cooky Book*, published in 1948 and containing 128 favorite recipes with numerous illustrations in its 43 pages.

Submitted by Jo Anne Barton

The Little Lady from Chatham, Virginia

Southern hospitality is not gone with the wind, at least not in Chatham Virginia. Food writer Patricia Mitchell*, owner of the Sims-Mitchell House Bed & Breakfast, makes sure of that. And you can't expect anything less from a woman who called her first 1968 Mustang "Penelope." You know, after Odysseus's wife, who kept the home fires burning and the soup bubbling while the hero was off slaying monsters and avoiding Sirens.

Every day Mrs. Mitchell's guests enjoy baked concoctions at breakfast that would cause Scarlet O'Hara to swoon, even without tight stays or Rhett Butler lurking around.

Most of the recipes that Mrs. Mitchell serves come from old-timey cookbooks, musty letters, and books originating in the climate-controlled atmosphere of library archives or antique hat boxes stored in Great-Aunt Hilda's attic.

For Patricia Mitchell not only cooks the old-fashioned way and lives in a stately Italianate-Victorian house—she also researches and writes about food history, bringing long-forgotten material alive after rooting around in obscure sources that most people never see. She mused on why she does what she does:

I'm foolishly sentimental and I love my homeland. Intellectually and emotionally I have probably over-romanticized the South, but it gives me pleasure to think of the South as a warm and welcoming woman. And a good woman likes to cook.

Mrs. Mitchell grew up in Chatham knowing little about cooking other than how to boil water. Cooking was the province of Lucille Breakley, her family's African-American cook. Only when Mrs. Mitchell eloped did she really learn how to wield a wooden spoon. And boy, did she cook up a storm after that.

Beginning with a few recipes, cobbled into a small pamphlet and made available for her B&B guests, Mrs. Mitchell moved on to writing a series of quaint little books, which she calls her "Inklings" series. It all started when one

of her guests—the director of a local history museum—suggested that she market her work to museums and gift shops.

Half-a-million copies and 100 titles later, the little lady from Chatham, Virginia runs a very successful cottage industry.

The books span no more than 37 pages, covered with thick, textured construction paper—the kind grade-school-age children cut with blunt-nosed scissors—and stapled down the middle in two places. A few editorial errors sprinkled here and there carry the homemade touch, conveying a sense that Grandma's recipes are only a stained index card away. It's easy to visualize the author bent over the table in her huge country kitchen, scraps of paper and articles spilling like loose flour all over the table, taking notes, mixing the ingredients for her books while a pot of soup simmers on the stove.

Her easy-to-read books serve as a jumping-off place for greater in-depth study of her various topics, which range from Southern cooking in all its permutations to French cooking in early America or what presidents ate in the White House over the years. In a "bite," the books resemble "appetizers," but all contain extensive footnotes, witnessing the immense amount of work and loving care going into each one. These days, her children, Sarah and David, assist her in producing the books.

In keeping with her love of the Christmas season, Mrs. Mitchell created four booklets about the most-loved American holiday: *Coming Home for*

Christmas, Colonial Christmas Cooking, Victorian Christmas Celebration Cookbook, and Sweet Memories of Christmas. By reading these booklets, the discerning reader learns various interesting things, including the fact that the Puritans didn't celebrate Christmas at all and that Christmas as Americans celebrate it today really only began in the late 1800s.

When asked what impact she wishes for her work, Mrs. Mitchell responded,

I want people to love their native (or chosen) soil and to understand her history and traditions. – That applies to people everywhere, not just the South. Loving a location or a region or a nation or even Planet Earth in general gives individuals something to think about beyond themselves and their routines and personal difficulties. I want people to feel entertained, informed, and, hopefully, inspired by things I write. I want them, too, to get a sense of connection to others and to the past.

Patricia Mitchell stretches the idea of Southern hospitality a lot farther than the groaning table of family reunions and Sunday suppers. Through her writing, she opens up the door and invites everybody in to the feast.

Sold at many museums and other establishments near historical sites across the United States, Mrs. Mitchell's books are also available by direct mail from the Mitchells. Contact them at answers@foodhistory.com, Sims-Mitchell House Bed & Breakfast, P.O. Box 429, Chatham, VA 24531, or 804-432-0595. See a complete list and description of the "Inkling" Series at <http://www.foodhistory.com/inklings/books/index.htm>. Order a few copies for Christmas gifts to surprise your favorite cooks. Or just a few to keep for yourself.

*No, Ms. Mitchell claims no blood ties to Margaret Mitchell, author of *Gone with the Wind*.

Submitted by Cynthia Bertelsen

Submitting Articles and Book Reviews to *The Virginia Culinary Thymes*

The Virginia Culinary Thymes accepts submissions on all manner of topics related to culinary history. Please send submissions to Cindy Bertelsen, editor, at cbertel@usit.net.