



At-Home History

Family Recipes

When you think of ways to study your family's history what typically comes to mind? Photographs of course! Maybe family documents such as birth and marriage certificates, family bibles, etc. But what about cookbooks and recipes? Is there a recipe box that your family has passed down? Maybe there were secret ingredients in family recipes that your grandmother wouldn't share with her church group but she shared with your mother?

Family recipes are just as important to historical research as any other documents. In many cases recipes were committed to memory and passed down to younger generations in the kitchen. Many of these recipes traveled overseas as families immigrated from Europe and Asia to the United States. Many more came over on slave ships from Africa. Recipes are an integral part of culture and remind you of where your family came from.

In many cases family recipes are lost as the older generations pass away. My great-grandmother came to the United States from Sicily and spoke no English. Her recipes were passed on to her children, and my grandmother taught her son the family recipe for red sauce, or "Sunday Gravy". My dad knows she must have left out some of the measurements for ingredients because she always did her cooking from memory instead of from a recipe card. The sauce we make for our spaghetti today tastes "as close as we can get it" according to my dad, but we always wonder what ingredients or specific measurements would make it exactly the way Gramma made it. That specific recipe card has been edited many times as we tweak the recipe to get it as close to Gramma's version as we can. It sits in a recipe box my dad made for me, and has not been shared with anyone outside of my immediate family. We hold that recipe close to our hearts because it reminds us of Gramma and all the generations that came before her, and it connects us to our family's past just as much as a photograph or a memory can.

Tips for Collecting Recipes

- Sit down with your parents or grandparents and ask them about your family's recipes. Ask them to share them with you. You may even get a hands-on cooking lesson!
- Look through your family's documents. Many recipes are written down and kept in journals or recipe boxes. Check and see if your family has a recipe book or box!
- Host a recipe-sharing party! Have friends and family make their favorite family recipes and write them down on index cards to share.
 - Stuck at home because of quarantine? No problem! Start an email or text thread with your family and ask them to send their favorite family recipes to everyone!
- Don't be afraid to improvise and experiment! In many cases family recipes aren't exact because your grandmother or great grandmother never actually measured out ingredients. Add a little more garlic or use a little less salt, and see how that changes the recipe.
- Dig out the church cookbook. One of the most treasured "artifacts" in my family is the "Holy Family P.T.U. Bohemian-American" Cookbook from the Catholic Church my dad's family attended in the 50s and 60s. Most of the recipes in there were shared by relatives and are close to if not exactly my dad's family recipes.
- Look online! Many family recipes are being shared more and more online, you may just find the missing ingredient your family's recipe needs!

Things to consider:

Why do you think your family has kept this recipe for so long? What makes it special?

What country/region/culture does this recipe come from? How can you learn more about your family's past based on where the recipe came from?

What does this recipe tell you about your family's history/culture?

Apple Stack Cake

While my father's ancestors hail from Sicily, Czechoslovakia, and other parts of Eastern Europe, my mother's family traces their lines deep through the Appalachian Mountains of Western North Carolina back to Sweden, Germany, and the British Isles. Appalachian culture is deep in our blood, and the family recipes there are just as treasured as on my father's side.

One recipe made often in my Mamaw's kitchen when she was living was Apple Stack Cake. The secret ingredient here is sorghum, although if you're in a pinch, simple molasses will do. Below is a relatively simple recipe for Apple Stack Cake, though I will tell you it's not **our** family's recipe. That's a family secret!

Apple Stack Cake recipe from Our State Magazine -
<https://www.ourstate.com/appalachian-apple-stack-cake/>

Yields: 12 to 16 servings.

Apple Filling:

- 1 pound (4 to 5 packed cups) dried unsulphured apples
- 1 cup firmly packed brown sugar
- 1 teaspoon ground cinnamon
- 1 teaspoon ground ginger
- ½ teaspoon ground mace or nutmeg
- 4 to 5 cups water, divided

Cake Layers:

- 5 cups all-purpose flour, plus more as needed
- 1 teaspoon baking soda
- 1 teaspoon baking powder
- 1 teaspoon salt
- ⅔ cup vegetable shortening (Crisco works fine!)
- 1 cup granulated sugar
- 1 cup sorghum (or you can substitute molasses if unable to find sorghum)
- 2 eggs, lightly beaten
- 1 cup buttermilk – shaken until it's good and bubbly.

For the filling: Place the apples, brown sugar, cinnamon, ginger, and mace in a large saucepan. Add enough water to cover and bring to a boil over high heat, reduce the heat to low, and let simmer, stirring frequently, until the apples are tender and the filling is very thick, about 1 hour. If the mixture gets dry, add more water. If it is soupy, continue to simmer until the excess cooks away. Use a potato masher to break up the apples into chunky sauce. Set aside.

For the cake layers: Preheat the oven to 350°. Grease and flour two 9-inch cake pans. You will be baking the layers in batches, for a total of six layers. (Alternatively, you can bake the layers one at a time in a greased and floured, well-seasoned cast-

iron skillet, which is the traditional technique. Yet another option is to pat the dough into six 9-inch rounds and bake them on cookie sheets lined with parchment paper.

Whisk together the flour, baking soda, baking powder, and salt in a large bowl.

In another large bowl, beat the shortening, sugar, and molasses with an electric mixer set to medium speed until the mixture is smooth and creamy.

Add the eggs one at a time, beating well after each addition.

Add the flour mixture in thirds, alternating with half of the buttermilk. The mixture should be the consistency of cookie dough, so knead the dough together with your hands if that works better than the mixer. Add a bit more flour if needed.

Pour the dough onto a lightly floured work surface. Divide the dough into six equal pieces. Wrap each piece in plastic wrap so it won't dry out. Use lightly floured hands to pat a piece of dough evenly into the bottom of the prepared cake pans. The dough should be about ½-inch thick. Lightly prick the dough all over with a fork, making a pretty pattern if you wish. Bake until the layers are firm when lightly pressed, about 15 minutes. The layers do not rise as they bake.

Turn out the first layer onto a large cake plate. Immediately spread it with one-fifth of the apple filling (about 1 heaping cup). Continue baking, stacking, and topping the warm layers. Leave the top layer bare.

Cover the cake with several layers of plastic wrap and then tea towels, or store it in an airtight cake carrier. Let the cake rest at room temperature for at least two days before cutting.