FAMILY FARE

Holidays are flavored with tradition

By Gracie Cavnar

A few years ago, I spent countless hours and crazy dollars scouring eBay for editions of the Better Homes and Gardens cookbook from the 1940s.

I was frantically searching for a lost recipe—a note I'd scribbled on a scrap of paper during a long-ago phone call with my mother. It was the key to a velvety poached pineapple cheesecake dressing we use on our Wohlfahrt salad and critical to my family’s Thanksgiving meal. The parade of iconic red and white plaid binders that arrived in my mailbox triggered memories of hours spent cooking with my parents. They were some of our happiest times together.

For millennia, cultural legacies, family traditions and lifetimes of shared memories have centered on food. Holiday meals are especially poignant. Everyone hankers for their own favorite dish—a link to their childhood.

In the American South, sweet potatoes, pecans and cornbread figure prominently at the table. Texans have long shared those traditions, compounded by food that we have learned to love from our neighbors even further south. For instance, though I find pecan pie irresistible, my hometown of San Antonio is more strongly influenced by Mexico than to Louisiana. Each December, grandmothers and aunts gathered in someone's kitchen to grind masa, stir steaming pots of picadillo and roll tamales—a sure signal to the children that Santa was close behind.

Our second-generation Welsh-Irish family happily absorbed the ancient tamales-making custom into our own holiday rituals. We experimented over the years with all kinds of fillings, from whole shrimp with their heads pecking out, to sweetly delicious dessert tamales made with cinnamon and pecans, and served with that other Mexican specialty—hot chocolate.

Making Christmas tamales is a tradition that I passed along to my kids and grandchildren, though I raised my family in Houston, where cultural diversity has inspired us to expand our tamale repertoire. That's one of the yummiest features of living in our melting pot city. Traditions from hundreds of countries offer a dizzying choice of culinary adventures.

Every year, I am reminded of this rich panoply when Recipe for Success Foundation conducts a story-writing contest for fourth-grade students. We ask the kids to tell us about their favorite holiday food in an essay that also describes the tradition behind the dish and their family’s preparation rituals. The holidays described are as varied as the dishes.

I love to take a literary tour through the recipes of Hanukkah, Kwanzaa and Eid al-Fitr. And it’s always particularly interesting for me to read about traditional dishes such as Vietnamese pho or Ethiopian wat—so different from my own childhood.

This year, half of our contest semifinalists wrote about tamales, every recipe unique. There were Mexican-style tamales wrapped in corn husks filled with jalapeño and garlic-spiced pork, or with chiles and chicken, or with onions and beef. There was a story about red and white Honduran tamales filled with green beans, green olives, potatoes, garbanzos, rice and spicy ancho chicken, all wrapped in a banana leaf.

Our contest winner, 9-year-old Jacqueline Marreroquin, explained that a 3,000-year-old Mayan tradition inspires her Guatemalan family’s Christmas tamales—a statement itself full of cultural layers. Jacqueline’s story describes her Aunt Irma’s method of coating banana leaves with a rich paste and layering that with a sauce of chicken, corn, onions and tomatoes, then topping everything with a pureed sauce made of roasted pumpkin seeds, sesame seeds, dried chiles and tomatoes. Her story’s measurements are not precise, and the directions are very general because, after decades of making Christmas tamales, her Aunt Irma cooks instinctively.

With few cookbooks available that feature them, traditional Guatemalan tamale recipes are passed from one generation to the next in the kitchen, where kids join the cooking party as soon as they can stand on a chair.

Since many of us don’t have that option, I suggest Mexican-style tamales are a good starting point, because recipes are easy to find. My favorites come from “The Cuisines of Mexico,” by Diane Kennedy and Rick Bayless’ “Mexican Kitchen” cookbooks. Tamale making includes small tasks easy enough for young children to participate and generates a busy kitchen full of family and friends that turns quickly festive with storytelling. It can be a multigenerational culinary adventure and a wonderful new holiday tradition for your family.

Pineapple Cheese Dressing

From Better Homes and Gardens Cookbook (1947)

Vs cup sugar
4 teaspoons cornstarch
Vs teaspoon salt
Juice of 1 lemon
Juice of 1 orange
1 cup unsweetened pineapple juice
2 beaten eggs
6 ounces cream cheese, softened at room temperature

Instructions: Mix together sugar, cornstarch and salt in the top of a double boiler set over a pan of water. Stir in orange, pineapple and pineapple juices. Turn heat to medium and cook about 20 minutes. Slowly add beaten egg, stirring constantly as they don’t curdle, and cook 5 minutes longer. Remove from heat and cool slightly. Using a hand mixer, beat the cream cheese into the cooled mixture, and chill.

Gracie Cavnar is the author of “East End Food Adventures with Maree Polo” and is the founder of the Recipe for Success Foundation.