



(Wherein some of the best cooks in the Lowcountry bring the recipes from their kitchens to yours.)

“We elves try to stick to the four main food groups: candy, candy canes, candy corns and syrup.” - Buddy the Elf (from *Elf*, 2003)

Food is a big deal for most of us this time of the year. Whether this has roots in faith, family tradition or clever marketing by shameless multi-national conglomerates, chances are most of us are looking forward to at least one – and probably one too many – special meals before the odometer rolls over to 2011.

Many years ago, when oil lamps powered television and images were “broadcast” in grainy black and white, my mother was a devoted member of The Cult of Julia. Thankfully, this occurred before her later conversion to the Sisterhood of Wheat Germ and Soy (SOWSY), so that we learned to appreciate what good food tasted like at an early age. Indeed, through Saint Julia’s influence we were introduced to the glories of all manner of rich sauces and fat-laden delicacies. I seem to recall a well-stained copy of *Mastering the Art of French Cooking* always open on the kitchen counter. Dad bought a stand-up freezer to accommodate the need for freshly butchered meat and poultry, which he bought from local farmers (the Old Man was light years ahead of this “locavore” thing). And holidays became gastronomic events.

For about two months each year, roughly a week before Thanksgiving to a week into the New Year, the Shaffer kitchen was an engine of culinary experimentation: a mad laboratory of roasting, mashing, mixing, baking, simmering, boiling, whipping and blanching. Everything was made from scratch all requiring much fuss and bother and occasional light profanity. The first time I ever heard my Mother curse was in the kitchen after a serving dish slipped out of her hand and smashed during a Thanksgiving dinner. She spit the “S” word at the floor like cobra venom.

Nearly everything that came out of the kitchen during these times contained enough butter and cream to qualify as a separate, possibly dangerous, food group, and all of it was delicious. Often during these meals there was fresh game to be had. One of the best meals I can recall featured a whole haunch of venison Mom prepared using an old family recipe traced back to the Black Forest of Germany. The meat slow roasted on the bone for an entire day, basted in a rich, dark wine sauce and served with a mélange of root vegetables. It was and is the best thing I have ever tasted. The house smelled of it for days. The recipe has since been lost and it was only these many years later on a summer trip to the Bavarian Alps that I’ve tasted anything even approaching it. I breeched culinary etiquette and asked the restaurant owner (and our server) if I might possibly get the recipe. “I don’t know,” he smiled, picking through his English. “You vill haff to ask Mama.” Mama looked like she may have stalked, killed and butchered that deer all by herself so I left her with a compliment. The search for the recipe continues. The memory remains.

Such memories run throughout the recipes collected within these pages, each one from the personal collections of some of the best cooks in the Lowcountry. Beekman Webb (The Foolish Frog) conjures up the fresh picked Devilled Crab he relished as a boy and a bygone era of Lowcountry life. Lauren Tillapaugh and Nadine Awoyemi (Sweetgrass), discover a cross-cultural culinary bond through their traditional Cornbread Dressing Recipe (no shortcuts allowed). Chef Richard Wilson of Maggie’s Pub is transported back to his grandmother’s kitchen with a simple pot of soup. Debbi Covington – our own *Everyday Gourmet* – shares a family recipe for Sour Cream Coconut Cake that recalls the tradition of church auctions and reinforces the awesome power of Black Walnut Extract when used for good. Nick Borreggine (Panini’s Café) prepared his Rosemary Roasted Prime Rib of Beef for a family holiday gathering five years ago and wound up carving a whole new tradition. Christopher and Bethany Hewitt’s Southern Graces brunch staple Almond French Toast Bake is a decadent family favorite. And so it goes.

Perhaps you’ll find some memories of your own among these suggestions. The list is nothing if not eclectic. The recipes range from simple holiday cocktails like Chef Brian Waters’ Homemade Eggnog to slightly more exotic efforts like Chef Will McLenagan’s Venison and Wild Boar Terrine or Chef Jeff Harris’ Linguine Provencal with Shrimp. Breakwater’s Beth Shaw shares a traditional (and incredibly simple) recipe for Cured Salmon, the perfect nosh for a

holiday cocktail party. There's a little something for everyone.

I spoke to Dad recently about plans for our own holiday meals. "It's been a long time since we've done a Rib Roast," I hint. The Old Man loves a good cut of beef.

"I'll take out a loan," he cracks and immediately adds, "and I'm going to get a goose. I want a goose like we used to have on the farm." He is many decades removed from that farm, but the memories of special meals with special people cling to the palate of the mind. I can still catch the scent of slow roasting venison across four decades. This year it will be roast beef and goose. And there will be butter. Oh yes, there will be butter.

- Mark Shaffer 12/16/10

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With this one, Chef Mike, you have a little bit of "Holiday" and a little bit of "Lowcountry" at the same time. It's a beautiful dish, and it's a great example of how to use local ingredients.



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