

Cooking Up Memories

By Jeff Sauve

WHEN I WAS A YOUNG MAN I recall a particular holiday when a visiting aunt, a non-Scandinavian, assisted in setting our table for the family dinner. I handed her a plate of lefse and witnessed her folding each piece as if it were a napkin, placing the appropriate silverware on top. In a quiet voice, I said, “Umm ... we eat those napkins.”

For many people there is a strong connection between food and memory, often tied to family recipes and cookbooks with handwritten notes in the margin. Cookbooks, in particular, mirror our changing culture and appetite, and many reflect the role of women in that culture.

St. Olaf College’s culinary history is confined to a handful of cookbooks, the first printed in 1907 and the most recent in 2008. The first volume, produced by the women of Phi Kappa Phi Society, proved a success, and three subsequent editions were issued over the next thirteen years. This 125-page cookbook with its red cloth cover promotes the “good influences or training” found in “good Norwegian homes.” The student newspaper, the *Manitou Messenger*, affirmed what the Phi Kappa Phi Society women already knew: the cookbook would “aid in assuring domestic tranquility and happiness.”

The recipes of the 1907 cookbook reflect their era: beef heart stuffed, jellied veal, six distinct mushes, and thirty-eight Norwegian dishes, including lefse and the delicacy *lude fisk* [sic].

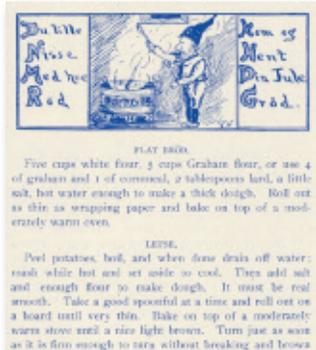
One contributor submitted her corn bread recipe in a twelve-line verse, the last four lines of which read:

*Best of all corn bread, you meet
Good enough for any king
Get your husband what he likes
And save a hundred household strikes.*

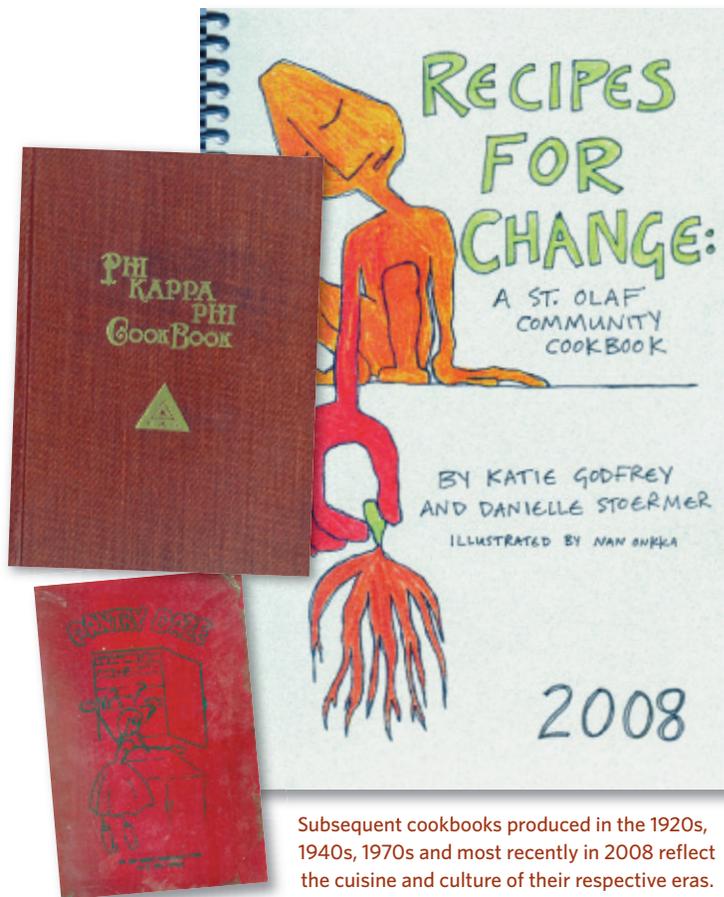
The last section of the book is devoted to “Household Hints and Suggestions,” including: “A rocking chair is a great comfort to the weary woman, if there are some odd moments while she is waiting,” and, “To keep a piece of meat from souring, immerse it in a crock of sour milk.

When the milk is washed off it leaves no bad taste.”

In 1928, the residents of Mohn Hall sold cookbooks to raise funds for a new radio in their parlor. *Pantry Daze*, produced by the Home Economics Club in 1949, tackled, in part, how to entertain at events such as banquets, brunches, showers and teas. In the 1970s, students who were members of the International Relations Club



This 1907 cookbook aspired to promote domestic tranquility as well as Norwegian favorites like jellied veal and lefse.



Subsequent cookbooks produced in the 1920s, 1940s, 1970s and most recently in 2008 reflect the cuisine and culture of their respective eras.

offered native recipes from their homelands, including Greek cheese pie from Maya Yiannoulos of Greece and dill bread from Dzintra Pavuls of Latvia.

In 2008, seniors Katie Godfrey and Danielle Stoermer — inspired by “the Environmental Studies Department for [its] interdisciplinary focus and for motivating us to take action outside the classroom” — addressed the ethics of eating, healthy food culture, and seasonal recipes containing unprocessed food in *Recipes for Change: A St. Olaf Community Cookbook*.

Faculty, students, staff, alumni, and parents contributed their favorite recipes. Godfrey and Stoermer also included personal essays, such as “The Joys of Gardening” and “Raspberries for Katie.” Of interest are recipes such as marinated baked tofu, boiled beets with balsamic vinaigrette, and “I Thigh for You” chicken, contributed by St. Olaf President David R. Anderson ’74. A second edition is planned for 2009.

Lefse failed to make the cut, but grandma’s bread, a recipe from Karen Appleton ’67, delights readers with a short explanation of the bread’s genesis, telling how the recipe was passed down orally. Appleton also provides her grandmother’s hint on how to tell when the dough had been kneaded long enough: “It feels just like a baby’s bottom.”

Memories, like the aroma of fresh baked bread, evoke comfort and sometimes a *kneaded* laugh. 🍞

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