LOOKING FOR HONEST STORIES
The trouble with community cookbooks.

LOCAL FARE
BY JOHN T. EDGE

The community-cookbook genre has lost its way. Junior League cookbooks have adopted four-color-process gatefolds. Quilting-circle cookbooks are now published for the coffee table, not the kitchen table. Church cookbooks have gone glam.

The names of women (and a few men) who contributed the recipes, and who usually received footnote-style mentions, have been excised, in favor of sidebars and profiles of the famous and near-famous, people whom community members aspire to claim as their own. Aunt Reba and her refrigerator rolls have given way to Reba McEntire and her musings about home and hearth.

Communities lost something in the process. And so did readers and cooks.

We now lack the ability to connect the dots between mother and daughter, sister and sister, by way of pound-cake recipes. Only infrequently, now, may a churchwoman, a quilter, a lady inclined toward service, hold a spiral-bound cookbook high and announce, with biblical gravitas, “These are my people, and this is their Good Book.”

Eudora Welty knew what was at stake. She understood how the best of these books serve as totems of identity. In an introduction to The Jackson Cookbook, published in 1971 by the Symphony League of Jackson, Mississippi, she wrote,

I daresay any fine recipe used in Jackson could be attributed to a local lady, or her mother—Mrs. Cabell’s Pecans, Mrs. Wright’s Cacoons, Mrs. Lyell’s Lemon Dessert. Recipes, in the first place, had to be imparted—there was something oracular in the transaction—and however often they were made after that by others, they kept their right names. I make Mrs. Mosal’s White Fruitcake every Christmas, having got it from my mother, who got it from Mrs. Mosal, and I often think to make a friend’s fine recipe is to celebrate her once more, and in that cheeriest, most aromatic of places to celebrate in, the home kitchen.

When People Were Nice and Things Were Pretty, a paperback published this year, and subtitled A Culinary History of Merigold: A Mississippi Delta Town, had the potential to prove a corrective to this trend. In some ways, it delivered. Contributors, mostly white, received credit for their creations. And readers got a conscribed survey of small-town food culture.

Pick up a copy of the book, and you learn how Mrs. B.B. Hughes crafts an Apple Pineapple Pie; and how Mary Katherine Lawrence bakes a Chinese Pork Chop Casserole, using, among other ingredients, one can of cream of mushroom soup and one can of “mixed Chinese vegetables.”

There are blessedly few celebrity sightings in When People Were Nice. Just a couple of references to Ronald Reagan’s press secretary Larry Speakes, who grew up in Merigold, and a stray quote from Paula Deen, the outré television personality, who, evidently, refers to a chicken impaled on a beer can and cooked on a grill, as “Beer in the Rear.”

The book includes a recipe traceable to a place called Plenty Hell Farm, a recipe for Glorified Peach Individuals, and a recipe that specifies the use of twenty-two Ritz crackers. In other words, When People Were Nice has personality, character, spunk.

Few community cookbooks serve up historical vignettes that tell us something about cookery. When People Were Nice does. You learn that Mrs. Frank Thomason, a nineteenth-century homemaker in Merigold, used “bear grease as a good shortening for biscuits because it never hardened.” And you discover that Vin Bremmer, “whose company produced the pink iced ginger cookie treat known as Stage Planks, added to the flow of money into the area.”

The book also includes evocative reminiscences. Will Dockery, who arrived in the late 1800s, and whose Bolivar County plantation
was a locus in the development of blues music, describes the region as "covered with blue cane fifteen to twenty feet high and the land was rich as cream."

The book's editor, Renelda Owen, who teaches at Delta State University, embraces the concept of foodways—the study of food production, procurement, and consumption as culture. (As a foodways proselytizer, I should mention that, in her introduction, she says nice things about one of my books.)

But there are problems with When People Were Nice. Sins of omission, mostly, that play across the pages like attitudinal vestiges of generations past.

In recounting the culinary history of Merigold, Owen tells the story of the "Coke Crowd." She describes them as "young matrons of Merigold," who, in the 1920s, drove their cars each day to the Clark Drugstore for packs of Nab crackers and bottles of Coca-Cola, which the proprietor served to them at curbside.

"These women had the luxury of getting to take their morning Coke break because all but one of them had a cook at home preparing lunch," Owen writes, paying appropriate, if stunting, homage to the cooks, likely of African heritage, who not only made lunch but crafted many of the recipes that compose the book. She continues, "These cooks, I am told, worked under the supervision of the matrons who selected and planned the meals and instructed their help in how each dish was to be prepared."

Owen should not repeat everything she is told. Among students of Southern food, it's now widely accepted that African-American "help" reinterpreted both European practices
and Native American ingredients, infusing Southern cuisine with defining African qualities.

Many of the foodstuffs, including okra and watermelon, that we now recognize as integral to the Southern diet, owe their place at the table to the natural resources and human capital exchanged during the slave trade. Diet and cooking processes.

My friend and colleague Jessica Harris, of Dillard University in New Orleans, has long argued that Southerners born in Africa brought with them the practice ofdeep-frying techniques, informing the region’s expertise in fried foods. African cooks also mastered the use of the sweet potato, the indigenous tuber comparable in appearance to the fibrous yams of their homeland.

The folklorist and historian Charles Joyner has applied the linguistic concept of creolization to the process, focusing on “an African culinary grammar—methods of cooking and spicing, remembered recipes, ancestral tastes.” The historian Eugene Genovese, a fellow traveler, characterized this general tendency as “the culinary despotism of the quarters over the big house.”

That’s one of the problems with *When People Were Nice*. Exceptional of a five-page passage on the Merigold Hunting Club—where black cooks hold forth—the cookery of the quarters, and of the people who live in the quarters, goes mostly without attribution.

I’m being harsh. No doubt about it. What’s more, I’m part of the problem. I expect too much from community cookbooks. And although the title telegraphs a whitewashed reality within, I expected too much from *When People Were Nice*.

Ten years ago, early in my writing career, I argued that, although many community cookbooks are formulaic in organization and content, “a closer look at the foods selected for inclusion, the names ascribed to the dishes, and the tales told of meals past, reveals as much about the community of the compilers as any local history could.”

I now realize that my read was accommodating, forgiving, even lazy. Few of those books have been great at telling honest stories of actual cooks. Too often, such books included loving portraits of the community’s grand houses, but failed to offer peeks into kitchens and at cooks.

Not many community cookbooks live up to my newly honed standards. With that knowl-
edge in mind, I wrote to Barbara Haber, a culinary historian, recently retired from Harvard. I asked her why community cookbooks didn’t often supply context along with recipes.

A realist, Haber wrote back, contending that the recipes in such books were often supplied by people who did not cook much. They offered recipes conceived by servants, or “simply copied from the backs of boxes and cans... They were focused on their charitable causes more than on food.”

When I fell for community cookbooks, I was enticed by the simplicity of their design ethic and their implicit pledge of common cause. I was looking for an honest story. The reality, I’ve come to know—but not accept—is that such cookbooks have always offered aspirational tales, told slant, to evoke the way the collaborators would like you to understand their place, and, by extension, them.

That’s the case in Merigold. And that’s the case ninety miles northeast of Merigold, in Oxford, where I live.

A few years back, a local nonprofit began work on a fundraising cookbook. Their publisher, a firm that specializes in such books, advised them to cut the attribution lines for cooks, lest they be accused of playing favorites. So they did. In an effort to make the end product more worldly, the same firm advised collaborators to source recipes from Internet-based recipe portals, and then tweak said recipes to make them their own. They did.

I now own a copy of that book. My wife and I like it; we cook from it. Proceeds from that publication have raised lots of money for a good community cause. But every time I thumb through and wonder about the creator of one or another recipe, I think about what was possible, about the stories we will never come to know, the connections we will never make.

Soon, I’ll find out how well I can take criticism. This fall, the Southern Foodways Alliance, the institute I direct at the University of Mississippi, will publish its own community cookbook, chock-full of recipes for garlic fried chicken, creamed collard greens, and sweet-potato biscuits.

The book will, no doubt, have failings. But I promise you this: You will know the names of the individuals who trusted us with their recipes, and you will glimpse a diversity of cooks within, including the “help” and those who just can’t help themselves.