



The Founding Kitchen

*50 Authentic Colonial American Recipes from the
1700s, Restored from the Original Cookbooks and Made
Simple for the Modern Kitchen*

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The Founding Kitchen: 50 Authentic Colonial American Recipes from the 1700s, Restored from the Original Cookbooks and Made Simple for the Modern Kitchen.

Written and adapted by Maggie Hartwell.

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The modern versions, the history notes, and every word of commentary are original to this book. The modern recipes have been adapted and tested for a household-sized kitchen.

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First edition.

Dedication

*For Nana Pearl, who taught me that a recipe is a letter from someone who
loved you.*

*And for Theo, Ruby, and Mason, who eat everything I cook and ask for the
story after.*

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A Word Before We Begin

Come sit down. I want to tell you what this book is before you start cooking from it.

I am not a historian. I am a grandmother with a tin recipe box and a very old cast-iron skillet named Old Bess.

But a few years ago I fell in love with something. The real, original cookbooks that the first American women actually wrote.

Not modern books about old food. The actual old books.

Two of them became my dearest friends, and you'll meet them both in these pages.

The first is Amelia Simmons. In 1796, she published *American Cookery*, the very first cookbook ever written by an American, about American food.

Before her, every cookbook in the colonies was British. Amelia was the first to write down our pumpkins, our cornmeal, our cranberries.

The second is Mary Randolph. In 1824, this Virginia woman published *The Virginia House-wife*, and it may be the finest early American cookbook of them all.

Where Amelia is plain and thrifty, Mary is confident and grand. Together they show you a young country learning to cook for itself.

Here is my promise to you. Every historical recipe in this book is real.

I did not make them up. I did not ask a machine to invent an old-timey recipe. I went to the actual books, and I copied the words exactly as Amelia and Mary wrote them, funny spelling and all.

Then I did the fun part. I sat with each one like a puzzle and figured out how to cook it in your kitchen today.

So every recipe in this book has three gifts for you. The real original, in her own words. My tested modern version. And a little story to tell at the table.

That's the whole book. Old wisdom, made cookable, with a story on the side.

Now let me teach you how to read one of these old recipes, and then we'll get cooking.

How to Read an 18th-Century Recipe

The first time you read one of these old recipes, it may look like another language. It isn't. It's just cooking from before anybody owned a measuring cup.

Let me hand you the key. Learn these few things and you can read any recipe in this book.

They cooked by feel, not by numbers

Amelia and Mary rarely give you a temperature or a timer. They didn't have them.

They tell you to bake in "a quick oven" or "a gentle fire," and they trusted you to know what that meant. I'll translate every time, but here's the rough guide.

A quick oven is a hot one, around 400 to 425°F.

A moderate oven is around 350°F.

A slow or gentle oven is low, around 300 to 325°F.

Their measurements were things around the kitchen

A "gill" is a quarter cup. A "wine glass" is about the same.

A "tea-cup" is roughly three-quarters of a cup. A "spoonful" is a tablespoon, more or less.

When they say "butter the size of a walnut," they mean about two tablespoons. When they say "the size of an egg," a bit more.

A few words that trip everybody up

Emptins is homemade yeast, usually brewed from hops. We use a packet.

Indian meal or **Indian corn** is cornmeal. "Indian" just meant it came from the native corn.

Pearl ash (or pearlash) is an early leavener, the great-grandmother of baking powder.

Loaf sugar is refined sugar, sold in a hard cone you chipped and pounded.

Rose water was their vanilla. It flavored everything sweet, and it's still on the grocer's shelf.

Suet and **marrow** are firm animal fats. I swap in butter, and tell you where.

To codle (coddle) means to cook gently in water just below a boil.

Their recipes fed a small army

These women cooked for big households, hired help, and whoever wandered in. A recipe might start with nine eggs and three pints of cream.

Don't let it scare you. I've scaled every single one down to a normal family. When you see the enormous original, just smile and turn to my version.

That's everything you need. You can now read a recipe older than the country itself.

Let's go cook.

CHAPTER 1

Breads & Hearthcakes

*Every recipe here comes from the first cookbook an
American ever wrote.*



Before we cook a single thing, I want you to meet a woman named Amelia Simmons.

In 1796, twenty years into this brand new country, Amelia did something nobody had ever done. She wrote a cookbook.

An *American* one. With American food in it, pumpkins and cornmeal and cranberries, not one more copy of some London book that told you to send the footman out for a turbot.

She couldn't lean on anybody, because there was nobody to lean on. She was the first.

She signed it "An American Orphan," because in 1796 a woman couldn't very well put her name on a book. She even apologized in the introduction for her lack of schooling.

And then she went right ahead and invented American cooking anyway.

Every recipe in this chapter is hers. We're starting where the whole thing started, so grab an apron and come stand by me.



Johnny Cakes (Hoe Cake) ★

STRAIGHT FROM AMELIA'S BOOK, 1796

Johnny Cake, or Hoe Cake. Scald 1 pint of milk and put to 3 pints of Indian meal, and half pint of flower—bake before the fire. Or scald with milk two thirds of the Indian meal, or wet two thirds with boiling water, add salt, molasses and shortening, work up with cold water pretty stiff, and bake as above.

— Amelia Simmons, *American Cookery*, 1796

Now, what is she even saying?

"Indian meal" is cornmeal, love. Tuck that away, because it's the secret to this whole chapter.

Whenever Amelia says *Indian*, she means corn. That's the grain the Native peoples grew, and taught the settlers to live on.

"Flower" is flour. Spelling was more of a suggestion in 1796.

And "bake before the fire" means exactly that. You slapped the batter on a board and stood it up facing the flames, no oven required, which is the whole point of a hoe cake.

Maggie's version

makes about 8 cakes

- ★ 2 cups stone-ground cornmeal
- ★ 1 tsp salt
- ★ 1 tbsp molasses
- ★ 1½ cups boiling water
- ★ bacon fat or butter, for the pan

Stir the salt and molasses into the cornmeal.

Pour the boiling water over it and stir. It'll look like wet sand and thicken as it sits, so let it rest ten minutes.

Get a skillet good and hot with a spoonful of bacon fat. This is where Old Bess earns her keep.

Drop the batter in mounds and press them flat, about a half inch thick.

Fry four or five minutes a side, until they're deep gold and crusty at the edges. Eat them hot with butter, or split and drowned in molasses.

While the oven does its work

Now, why "hoe cake"? The story, and I'll let you decide if you believe it, is that field hands with no kitchen baked these on the flat blade of a garden hoe, held right over the fire.

As for "johnny," most folks think it wore down from "journey cake." A cornmeal cake this sturdy would ride in your saddlebag a week and never complain.

Here's the part I'd tell the grandkids. This plain little cake fed the whole Revolution.

Cornmeal was cheap, it was everywhere, and it didn't need the wheat we mostly couldn't grow. Washington's army marched on these, and so did everybody's grandfather.



Indian Slapjacks

STRAIGHT FROM AMELIA'S BOOK, 1796

Indian Slapjack. One quart of milk, 1 pint of indian meal, 4 eggs 4 spoons of flour, little salt, beat together, baked on gridles, or fry in a dry pan, or baked in a pan which has been rub'd with suet, lard or butter.

— Amelia Simmons, *American Cookery*, 1796

Now, what is she even saying?

A slapjack is a flapjack, which is a pancake. So Ruby is already pulling her stool up to the counter.

It's the same cornmeal as the johnnycake, but now Amelia's cracked four eggs in and thinned it with milk. Instead of a sturdy field cake, you get something soft enough to flip.

"Baked on gridles" is a griddle. That's the whole trick.

Maggie's version

makes about 10 small pancakes

- * 1 cup cornmeal
- * 2 tbsp flour
- * ½ tsp salt
- * 2 eggs
- * 2 cups milk
- * butter or lard, for the griddle

Whisk it all together and let it sit five minutes while the griddle heats.

It's a looser batter than you're used to, so pour them small, about three inches across.

When the edges look set and the bubbles stop filling back in, flip once. Serve with maple syrup, or with molasses if you want to taste what Amelia tasted.

While the oven does its work

There's a whole argument about where "flapjack" comes from, and it's older than the country. You can find "flap-jack" right there in Shakespeare.

But *cornmeal* slapjacks are ours.

The eggs are the tell that this was a good morning. Eggs meant the hens were laying and you could afford to be generous.

A poor Tuesday got you a plain johnnycake. A slapjack with four eggs in it meant somebody at that table was worth spoiling.



Butter Biscuit

STRAIGHT FROM AMELIA'S BOOK, 1796

Butter Biscuit. One pint each milk and emptins, laid into flour, in sponge; next morning add one pound butter melted, not hot, and knead into as much flower as will with another pint of warmed milk, be of a sufficient consistence to make soft — some melt the butter in the milk.

— Amelia Simmons, *American Cookery*, 1796

Now, what is she even saying?

Here's a word you'll meet all through this chapter, so let's make friends with it. **Emptins** is homemade yeast.

Before you could buy a tidy little packet, you saved the foam off the top of your home-brewed beer or cider, the "emptyings," and that was what made your bread rise.

So "laid into flour, in sponge" means you mixed the milk and the yeast-foam into some flour the night before, and let it get bubbly and alive overnight.

This isn't a quick biscuit like the fluffy Southern kind. It's a proper overnight yeasted roll, and it's worth the wait.

Maggie's version

makes about 12 rolls

- * 1 cup warm milk
- * 2¼ tsp active dry yeast
- * 1 cup flour (for the sponge)
- * ½ cup butter, melted and cooled

- ✱ 2 tbsp sugar
- ✱ 1 tsp salt
- ✱ ½ cup warm milk
- ✱ 2½ to 3 cups more flour

The night before, stir the warm milk, yeast, and 1 cup flour together. Cover it and leave it on the counter overnight. That's your sponge.

In the morning, add the melted butter, sugar, salt, the second ½ cup of warm milk, and enough of the remaining flour to make a soft dough.

Knead it five minutes, then let it rise until doubled.

Shape into rounds, let them puff up again for half an hour, and bake at 400°F for about 15 minutes, until golden.

While the oven does its work

I want you to picture the rhythm of Amelia's kitchen, because this recipe *is* that rhythm.

You couldn't decide at five o'clock to have bread with supper. Bread was a two-day conversation you started the night before with a cup of beer foam.

Every colonial cook kept her emptins going like a little pet, feeding it, guarding it. If it died, so did your bread, until a neighbor took pity.

That tired packet of yeast in your cupboard drawer is pure luxury. Nana Pearl would've called it cheating, and she'd have used it anyway.



Rusk

STRAIGHT FROM AMELIA'S BOOK, 1796

RUSK. No. 6. Three quarters of a pound butter, one pound sugar, 12 eggs, one quart milk, put as much flour as they will wet, a spoon of cinnamon, gill emptins, let it stand till very puffy or light; roll into small cakes and let it stand on oiled tins while the oven is heating, bake 15 minutes in a quick oven, then wash the top with sugar and whites, while hot.

— Amelia Simmons, *American Cookery*, 1796

Now, what is she even saying?

A "gill" (say it like *jill*) is a quarter pint, about a half cup. So "gill emptins" is a half cup of that homemade yeast again.

A "quick oven" is a hot one, call it 400°F.

"Wash the top with sugar and whites while hot" is a glaze. You beat an egg white with sugar and brush it over the rolls the second they come out, so they set up shiny and sweet.

A rusk is a rich little bread roll. Amelia's has twelve eggs in it, so you know it was for company.

Maggie's version

makes about 12 rolls

- ✱ 1 cup warm milk
- ✱ 2¼ tsp yeast
- ✱ 6 tbsp butter, softened
- ✱ ½ cup sugar

- ✱ 3 eggs
- ✱ 1 tsp cinnamon
- ✱ about 4 cups flour
- ✱ glaze: 1 egg white beaten with 2 tbsp sugar

Mix the milk, yeast, butter, sugar, eggs, and cinnamon, then work in enough flour for a soft dough.

Let it rise until puffy, then shape it into small rolls.

Let them sit on the pan while the oven heats to 400°F. Bake 15 minutes.

Brush the tops with the sugar-and-white glaze while they're still hot.

While the oven does its work

Rusks have a double life. Fresh, they're a sweet roll for the table.

But their real job, back then, was to be baked *twice*, sliced and dried hard in a cooling oven until they'd keep for months.

That's what made them travel food. A sailor crossing the Atlantic, a family heading west in a wagon, they lived on twice-baked rusks the way you'd live on granola bars.

The word even sailed off into other languages. The *biscotti* you dunk in your coffee is a cousin, and so is the German *zwieback*, which just means "twice-baked."



Diet Bread

STRAIGHT FROM AMELIA'S BOOK, 1796

Diet Bread. One pound sugar, 9 eggs, beat for an hour, add to 14 ounces flour, spoonful rose water, one do. cinnamon or coriander, bake quick.

— Amelia Simmons, *American Cookery*, 1796

Now, what is she even saying?

Don't get your hopes up, sweetheart. "Diet bread" is not going to help anybody's waistline.

"Diet" is just an old word for *fare*, for the food you eat day to day. Diet bread is a light sponge cake.

Now look at that method: "9 eggs, beat for an hour." There's no baking powder in 1796, none, so the only thing lifting this cake is the air you beat into the eggs by hand.

For an hour. That's not a recipe, that's a forearm workout.

"One do." means "one ditto," one spoonful of the same. So it's a spoon of rose water and a spoon of cinnamon.

Maggie's version

makes one loaf or 8-inch cake

- ✱ 5 eggs
- ✱ $\frac{3}{4}$ cup sugar
- ✱ 1 cup plus 2 tbsp flour
- ✱ 1 tsp rose water

✳ ½ tsp cinnamon

Beat the eggs and sugar until they're pale, tripled in volume, and fall in a ribbon off the whisk. That's about 8 to 10 minutes with a mixer, or an hour with a whisk and a grudge, if you want to honor Amelia.

Gently fold in the flour, rose water, and cinnamon, keeping all that air you worked for.

Pour into a buttered pan and bake at 350°F for 25 to 30 minutes.

While the oven does its work

Two things to tell Theo when he asks.

First, before chemical leavening, *eggs were the technology*. A cook's whole reputation for a light cake lived in her arm, and a woman who could beat a sponge an hour without it falling was worth marrying, as far as some folks were concerned.

Second, that spoon of rose water. Rose water was the vanilla of its day.

Real vanilla came from the other side of the world and cost a fortune. So for two hundred years, the flavor of "something sweet and special" was roses. We just forgot.



Potato Cake

STRAIGHT FROM AMELIA'S BOOK, 1796

Potato Cake. Boil potatoes, peel and pound them, add yolks of eggs, wine and melted butter work with flour into paste, shape as you please, bake and pour over these melted butter, wine and sugar.

— Amelia Simmons, *American Cookery*, 1796

Now, what is she even saying?

"Peel and pound them" is peel and mash.

You make a soft dough from mashed potato, egg yolks, a splash of wine, melted butter, and just enough flour to hold it together.

Shape it however you like ("shape as you please," Amelia trusts you), bake it, then spoon a warm sauce of butter, wine, and sugar over the top.

It's mashed potatoes in its Sunday clothes.

Maggie's version

makes about 8 small cakes

- ✱ 1 cup mashed potato, cooled
- ✱ 2 egg yolks
- ✱ 2 tbsp melted butter
- ✱ 2 tbsp white wine
- ✱ pinch of salt
- ✱ about 1 to 1¼ cups flour
- ✱ *sauce*: 3 tbsp butter, 2 tbsp white wine, 2 tbsp sugar

Mix the potato, yolks, butter, wine, and salt, then work in enough flour to make a soft dough you can shape.

Form small cakes, set them on a buttered pan, and bake at 375°F for about 20 minutes, until set and lightly gold.

Warm the sauce ingredients together until the sugar dissolves, and spoon it over the cakes while everything's hot.

While the oven does its work

Here's a funny bit of history. In a lot of 1796 kitchens, the potato was still a slightly suspicious newcomer.

Folks weren't entirely sure about a food that grew in the *dark, underground*, and some thought it was fit only for livestock.

So a recipe that took the humble, doubted potato and dressed it up with wine and sugar, that was a little act of quiet cleverness.

Waste nothing, and make the cheap thing feel like a celebration. Nana Pearl built her whole kitchen on that idea.



A Cheap Seed Cake

STRAIGHT FROM AMELIA'S BOOK, 1796

A cheap seed Cake. Rub one pound sugar, half an ounce allspice into four quarts flour, into which pour one pound butter, melted in one pint milk, nine eggs, one gill emptins, (carroway seed and currants, or raisins if you please) make into two loaves, bake one and half hour.

— Amelia Simmons, *American Cookery*, 1796

Now, what is she even saying?

The "seed" in a seed cake is **caraway**. Those are the little curved seeds with the faint licorice-and-rye flavor you know from good pumpernickel.

Amelia leaves it optional ("carroway seed and currants, or raisins if you please"), but the caraway is the whole soul of the thing.

"One gill emptins" is our half cup of yeast again, so this is another gently risen loaf, not a modern quick cake.

And "cheap" is right there in the title, because she's proud of it. This is a lovely cake that didn't cost a fortune.

Maggie's version

makes 1 loaf

- ✱ 4 cups flour
- ✱ ½ cup sugar
- ✱ 1 tsp allspice
- ✱ ½ cup butter, melted in ¾ cup warm milk
- ✱ 2 eggs

- ✱ 2¼ tsp yeast
- ✱ 1 tbsp caraway seeds
- ✱ ½ cup currants

Combine everything into a soft dough and knead it smooth.

Let it rise until doubled, then shape it into a loaf.

Let it rise again in the pan, and bake at 350°F for about 40 minutes, until it sounds hollow when you tap the bottom.

While the oven does its work

For a good three hundred years, if you said "seed cake," nobody asked *which* seed. Everybody knew.

Caraway seed cake was *the* teatime cake of the English-speaking world. It was in every novel and on every sideboard, so ordinary it barely needed a recipe.

And then, sometime in the last century, it simply vanished from our tables.

Mason took one bite of mine, made a face, said "it tastes like *rye bread that wants to be dessert*," and then ate the other half of the slice. That's a seed cake for you. It wins you over sideways.



A Loaf Cake

STRAIGHT FROM AMELIA'S BOOK, 1796

Loaf Cakes. No. 4. Five pound of flour, 2 pound of butter, 2 and a half pounds of loaf sugar, 2 and a half pounds of raisins, 15 eggs, 1 pint of wine, 1 pint of emptins, 1 ounce of cinnamon, 1 gill rose-water, 1 gill of brandy—baked like No. 1. [No. 1: heat the oven with dry wood ... To frost it. Whip 6 whites ... add 3 pound of sifted loaf sugar and put on thick, as it comes hot from the oven.]

— Amelia Simmons, *American Cookery*, 1796

Now, what is she even saying?

This is Amelia showing off. A whole pint of yeast ("emptins"), a pint of wine, a gill of brandy, two and a half pounds of raisins.

It's a grand, boozy, fruit-studded celebration loaf, and she gives it a thick white frosting of whipped egg whites and sugar, spooned on while it's hot.

We're going to scale her mountain down to one honest loaf. Unless you're feeding a wedding, five pounds of flour is a threat, not a recipe.

Maggie's version

makes 1 large loaf

✱ 4 cups flour

✱ 2¼ tsp yeast

✱ ¾ cup butter, softened

✱ ¾ cup sugar

✱ 3 eggs

✱ ¾ cup raisins

- ✱ ¼ cup sweet wine
- ✱ 2 tbsp brandy
- ✱ 1 tbsp cinnamon
- ✱ 1 tbsp rose water
- ✱ ¼ to ½ cup warm milk, to bring it together

Mix everything but the raisins into a soft, rich dough, and knead it well.

Let it rise until doubled, then work in the raisins.

Shape it into a loaf pan and let it rise again. Bake at 350°F for 40 to 45 minutes.

If you want to be Amelia about it, whisk an egg white with a cup of powdered sugar and spoon it thick over the top while the loaf is still hot.

While the oven does its work

Keep this loaf in mind, because it's the mother of a legend.

Take exactly this, a big, yeasted, spiced, wine-and-fruit loaf, and make it enormous. You get **Election Cake**: the cake New England towns baked by the yard to celebrate voting day, back when casting a ballot was a genuine party and cake was how you threw it.

Amelia printed a version in her second edition a few months after this one.

So this humble "Loaf Cake No. 4" is the everyday ancestor of a cake that literally celebrated democracy. Not bad for something you can make on a Tuesday.



Molasses Gingerbread

STRAIGHT FROM AMELIA'S BOOK, 1796

Molasses Gingerbread. One table spoon of cinnamon, some coriander or allspice, put to four tea spoons pearl ash, dissolved in half pint water, four pound flour, one quart molasses, four ounces butter, (if in summer rub in the butter, if in winter, warm the butter and molasses and pour to the spiced flour,) knead well 'till stiff, the more the better, the lighter and whiter it will be; bake brisk fifteen minutes; don't scorch; before it is put in, wash it with whites and sugar beat together.

— Amelia Simmons, *American Cookery*, 1796

Now, what is she even saying?

Meet the star of the whole chapter: **pearl ash**.

Before baking soda existed, cooks leached lye out of wood ashes, boiled it down, and got a white powder that puffed up their dough. That's pearl ash, and it is baking soda's great-great-grandmother.

Amelia dissolves four teaspoons of it in water and works it into a stiff molasses dough.

"Bake brisk" means a hot, fast oven. And bless her, she promises that the harder you knead it, "the lighter and whiter it will be," which is the kind of confidence I aspire to.

Maggie's version

makes about 24 cookies

- ✿ 3½ cups flour
- ✿ 1 cup molasses

- ✱ 4 tbsp butter
- ✱ 1 tbsp cinnamon
- ✱ 1 tsp allspice
- ✱ 1 tsp baking soda dissolved in $\frac{1}{4}$ cup warm water
- ✱ pinch of salt

Warm the butter and molasses together until loose, then stir into the flour, spices, salt, and the soda-water.

Knead it into a stiff dough, then roll it about a quarter inch thick and cut into shapes.

Bake at 350°F for 12 to 15 minutes. And mind Amelia's warning, don't scorch.

While the oven does its work

Here's the one to make Theo put his fork down. That pearl ash isn't just a quaint old ingredient. It's a landmark.

Amelia Simmons was the *first person in the history of printed cookbooks to use a chemical leavener in a recipe*. Right here. 1796.

Every box of baking soda and every can of baking powder on earth traces back through a straight line to a colonial woman dissolving wood-ash lye in a cup of water.

She didn't just write the first American cookbook. She quietly kicked off modern baking, and then apologized in the introduction for not being educated enough to write a book.



Another Christmas Cookey

STRAIGHT FROM AMELIA'S BOOK, 1796

Another Christmas Cookey. To three pound flour, sprinkle a tea cup of fine powdered coriander seed, rub in one pound butter, and one and half pound sugar, dissolve three tea spoonfuls of pearl ash in a tea cup of milk, kneed all together well, roll three quarters of an inch thick, and cut or stamp into shape and size you please, bake slowly fifteen or twenty minutes; tho' hard and dry at first, if put into an earthern pot, and dry cellar, or damp room, they will be finer, softer and better when six months old.

— Amelia Simmons, *American Cookery*, 1796

Now, what is she even saying?

This is it. The ancestor of every Christmas cookie you've ever cut into a star.

Coriander for the spice, pearl ash for the lift (our baking soda again), butter and sugar rubbed into flour. Roll it thick and stamp your shapes.

But read that last line twice, because it's the best line in the whole book. They are "finer, softer and better when *six months old*."

Amelia is telling you to bake your Christmas cookies and then hide them in a crock in the cellar until they *improve*. She is not joking.

Maggie's version

makes about 30 cookies

- ✱ 3 cups flour
- ✱ 1 cup sugar
- ✱ ¾ cup (1½ sticks) butter

- ✱ 1 tbsp ground coriander
 - ✱ ¾ tsp baking soda dissolved in 3 tbsp milk
-

Cream the butter and sugar, then beat in the coriander and the soda-milk.

Work in the flour to a firm dough.

Roll it a generous quarter inch thick, cut your shapes, and bake at 325°F for 12 to 15 minutes, low and slow so they stay pale.

Eat them now if you must. Or hide them.

While the oven does its work

Two things nobody tells you about old Christmas cookies.

First, the spice wasn't cinnamon and it wasn't nutmeg. It was **coriander**, that warm, faintly citrusy seed. That's the true taste of an eighteenth-century Christmas.

Second, that "better at six months" business is real. Colonial families baked their Christmas cookies in *high summer*, packed them in stoneware crocks, and let them mellow in the cellar for half a year, curing like a cheese.

So the next time somebody tells you homemade cookies have to be fresh, you tell them Amelia Simmons made hers in July.

Ruby doesn't believe me either. She still ate nine.

CHAPTER 2

Puddings & Sweet Things

Amelia's desserts, and the Virginia cook who took up where she left off.



If Chapter One was Amelia teaching us to make bread, this one is Amelia letting us have dessert.

She was mad for sweets, and I love her for it. Puddings, custards, a tart, and a pie that started a whole American tradition.

We'll spend the first half of this chapter still in her kitchen.

Then, about halfway through, I'm going to introduce you to somebody new. A Virginia woman named Mary Randolph, who wrote her own great cookbook a generation later.

The two of them never met. But set their books side by side, and you can watch American cooking grow up.

So loosen your apron strings. We're going to need the room.



Pompkin Pie ★

STRAIGHT FROM AMELIA'S BOOK, 1796

Pompkin. No. 1. One quart stewed and strained, 3 pints cream, 9 beaten eggs, sugar, mace, nutmeg and ginger, laid into paste No. 7 or 3, and with a dough spur, cross and chequer it, and baked in dishes three quarters of an hour.

— Amelia Simmons, *American Cookery*, 1796

Now, what is she even saying?

This little paragraph is the granddaddy of every pumpkin pie you have ever eaten. So we're doing it first.

Amelia wrote it for a kitchen feeding half of Connecticut. Nine eggs, three pints of cream, sweetheart, unless the whole congregation is coming, we're trimming this down to one honest pie.

"Cross and chequer it with a dough spur" just means run a criss-cross of pastry over the top. You have a fork. The fork has never once let us down.

Maggie's version

makes one 9-inch pie

- ★ 1 pie crust, in a deep 9-inch dish
- ★ 2 cups pumpkin, cooked and strained smooth (a 15-oz can, and I won't tell)
- ★ 1½ cups heavy cream
- ★ 3 eggs, beaten
- ★ ¾ cup sugar
- ★ ½ tsp mace, ½ tsp nutmeg, ½ tsp ginger

Whisk the pumpkin, cream, eggs, sugar, and spices together until smooth as gossip.

Pour it into your crust. Lay a few thin strips of dough across the top in a criss-cross if you're feeling fancy like Amelia.

Bake at 375°F for about 45 minutes, until the middle stops wobbling when you nudge it. Cool it before you cut it. I know. The hardest part.

While the oven does its work

Here's the thing to save for Thanksgiving. There is no cinnamon in this pie. None.

Amelia spiced her pumpkin with **mace, nutmeg, and ginger**. That "pumpkin spice" everybody loses their minds over was invented in the last hundred years or so.

Make this pie and you're tasting the exact one they'd have set on the table when the country was brand new.

Now go tell the grandkids that, and watch their faces.



A Nice Indian Pudding

STRAIGHT FROM AMELIA'S BOOK, 1796

A Nice Indian Pudding. No. 1. 3 pints scalded milk, 7 spoons fine Indian meal, stir well together while hot, let stand till cooled; add 7 eggs, half pound raisins, 4 ounces butter, spice and sugar, bake one and half hour.

— Amelia Simmons, *American Cookery*, 1796

Now, what is she even saying?

Remember our word from Chapter One? "Indian meal" is cornmeal. So this is a cornmeal pudding, soft and slow-baked.

You scald the milk, stir the cornmeal in while it's hot, and let it cool so the grain drinks up the milk and swells.

Then in go the eggs, butter, raisins, and sweetening, and it bakes low and slow into something between a custard and a cake.

Maggie's version

makes one baking dish, serves 6

- ✱ 3 cups whole milk
- ✱ ⅓ cup cornmeal
- ✱ 3 tbsp butter
- ✱ ⅓ cup molasses
- ✱ ¼ cup sugar
- ✱ 2 eggs
- ✱ ⅓ cup raisins
- ✱ 1 tsp cinnamon, ½ tsp ginger, ¼ tsp nutmeg

Scald the milk in a pot, then whisk in the cornmeal and stir until it thickens, a few minutes.

Take it off the heat and let it cool a bit. Stir in the butter, molasses, and sugar, then the eggs, spices, and raisins.

Pour into a buttered dish and bake at 325°F for about an hour and a half, until just set. Serve it warm, with cold cream poured over if you're doing it right.

While the oven does its work

New Englanders will still argue with you about Indian pudding. It's that beloved.

The trick the old cooks knew is the slow bake. An hour and a half turns humble cornmeal and molasses into something deep and caramelly and soft.

I made it for the grandkids expecting a fight. Theo asked for the history. Ruby asked for seconds.

This is cornmeal that went off to finishing school.



Shrewsbury Cake

STRAIGHT FROM AMELIA'S BOOK, 1796

Shrewsbury Cake. One pound butter, three quarters of a pound sugar, a little mace, four eggs mixed and beat with your hand, till very light, put the composition to one pound flour, roll into small cakes—bake with a light oven.

— Amelia Simmons, *American Cookery*, 1796

Now, what is she even saying?

Despite the name, a Shrewsbury cake is a cookie. A rich, buttery, roll-and-cut cookie, like a shortbread with airs.

The spice is **mace**, and don't skip it, that's the whole personality. "Beat with your hand till very light" means cream the butter and sugar until it's fluffy.

"A light oven" is a gentle one. You want these pale, not browned.

Maggie's version

makes about 24 cookies

- ✱ 1 cup (2 sticks) butter, softened
- ✱ $\frac{3}{4}$ cup sugar
- ✱ $\frac{1}{2}$ tsp ground mace
- ✱ 2 eggs
- ✱ about $2\frac{1}{2}$ cups flour

Cream the butter, sugar, and mace until light and fluffy, then beat in the eggs.

Work in the flour to a soft dough, and chill it half an hour so it firms up.

Roll it a quarter inch thick, cut into rounds, and bake at 350°F for about 12 minutes. Pull them while they're still pale.

While the oven does its work

Shrewsbury cakes are older than the country by a century and a half. They're named for the town of Shrewsbury in England, and folks were baking them back in the 1600s.

They came across the ocean in the colonists' memory and their recipe books, and Amelia set them down as an American cookie.

And that mace. Mace is the lacy red shell that grows around a nutmeg, dried and ground.

For a long time, mace was *the* cookie spice, before cinnamon shouldered its way to the front. One bite of these and you'll wonder why we ever let it go.



A Baked Custard

STRAIGHT FROM AMELIA'S BOOK, 1796

Custards. 2. Sweeten a quart of milk, add nutmeg, wine, brandy, rose-water and six eggs; bake in tea cups or dishes, or boil in water, taking care that it don't boil into the cups.

— Amelia Simmons, *American Cookery*, 1796

Now, what is she even saying?

A custard is just milk and eggs, coaxed gently into softness with a little heat.

Amelia bakes hers in teacups set in a pan of water, "taking care that it don't boil into the cups," so the water bath keeps them silky instead of scrambling them.

But look at what she puts in. Wine, brandy, *and* rose water. This is not a shy custard.

Maggie's version

makes 4 to 6 teacups

- * 2 cups milk
- * 3 eggs
- * ¼ cup sugar
- * 2 tbsp sweet wine
- * 1 tbsp brandy
- * 1 tsp rose water
- * pinch of nutmeg

Whisk everything together gently, so you don't beat in too much air.

Pour into teacups or ramekins and set them in a baking pan. Pour hot water into the pan halfway up their sides.

Bake at 325°F for 35 to 40 minutes, until just set with a little wobble in the center. Grate a little more nutmeg on top.

While the oven does its work

I want you to notice something about that ingredient list, because it tells you how people lived.

Amelia spikes a simple nursery custard with wine, brandy, *and* rose water. The gentlest dessert in the book has more liquor in it than my Walt ever put in his eggnog.

A little wine was medicine. A little brandy was comfort. And rose water, as I keep telling you, was the vanilla they couldn't afford.

Put all three in a cup of warm custard and you have the eighteenth century in a spoonful.



Cranberry Tart

STRAIGHT FROM AMELIA'S BOOK, 1796

Cranberries. Stewed, strained and sweetened, put into paste No. 9, and baked gently.

— Amelia Simmons, *American Cookery*, 1796

Now, what is she even saying?

That's the whole recipe. Amelia was not a woman who wasted words on a cranberry.

You stew the berries down soft, push them through a sieve for a smooth filling, sweeten them, spoon them into a pastry shell ("paste No. 9"), and bake it gently.

Tart, ruby-red, and about as American as a thing can be.

Maggie's version

makes one 9-inch tart

-  1 tart or pie shell, partly baked
-  12 oz cranberries (fresh or frozen)
-  $\frac{3}{4}$ cup sugar
-  $\frac{1}{4}$ cup water

Stew the cranberries with the sugar and water over medium heat until they burst and go thick and jammy, about 10 minutes.

If you want Amelia's smooth filling, push it through a sieve. If you like the skins, leave it be. I leave it be.

Cool it a little, spoon it into your shell, and bake at 350°F for 20 to 25 minutes, until set. It slices best cold.

While the oven does its work

Here is a fact I love. The cranberry is one of only a small handful of fruits that are truly native to North America.

The Native peoples ate them long before any ship arrived, mashed into pemmican, used as dye and medicine. They were *here*.

And here is Amelia in 1796, baking that native berry into a tart, while most of England had never once tasted one.

So when you set out cranberry sauce this November, know that it has a paper trail. It runs straight back to this one stubborn line in the first American cookbook.



Syllabub from the Cow

STRAIGHT FROM AMELIA'S BOOK, 1796

To make a fine Syllabub from the Cow. Sweeten a quart of cyder with double refined sugar, grate nutmeg into it, then milk your cow into your liquor, when you have thus added what quantity of milk you think proper, pour half a pint or more, in proportion to the quantity of syllabub you make, of the sweetest cream you can get all over it.

— Amelia Simmons, *American Cookery*, 1796

Now, what is she even saying?

Read that first instruction again. "Milk your cow into your liquor."

I am not making it up, love. A syllabub is a frothy, half-drink half-dessert, and the old way to make it was to sweeten a bowl of cider, then squirt warm milk straight from the cow's udder into it, from a height, so it foamed up all on its own.

Then you floated cream over the top. Most of us are fresh out of cows, so we'll cheat with a whisk.

Maggie's version

makes 4 glasses

- ✱ 1½ cups apple cider (sweet, or hard if you want Amelia's kick)
- ✱ 2 tbsp sugar
- ✱ pinch of nutmeg
- ✱ ½ cup whole milk
- ✱ 1 cup cream

Stir the sugar and nutmeg into the cider and divide it among four glasses.

Whisk or froth the milk and cream together until foamy and light.

Spoon and pour the froth over the cider so it sits on top in a soft cloud. Serve it right away, with a spoon and a straw both.

While the oven does its work

There is no oven for this one, so just sit with me a minute.

I love a syllabub because it's so gloriously impractical. It's not really a drink and it's not really a pudding, it's a party trick, a bit of froth and fun.

And that instruction. Amelia simply assumed you had a cow standing in the yard, warm and willing, whenever the mood for dessert struck.

Imagine the confidence. You want something sweet, so you go and *milk the cow into a bowl of cider*. I think about that woman more than I should.



Sweet Potato Pudding

STRAIGHT FROM MARY RANDOLPH'S BOOK, 1824

Sweet Potato Pudding. Boil one pound of sweet potatos very tender, rub them while hot through a colander; add six eggs well beaten, three quarters of a pound of powdered sugar, three quarters of butter, and some grated nutmeg and lemon peel, with a glass of brandy; put a paste in the dish, and when the pudding is done, sprinkle the top with sugar, and cover it with bits of citron. Irish potato pudding is made in the same manner, but is not so good.

— Mary Randolph, *The Virginia House-wife*, 1824

Now, what is she even saying?

Before we cook, come meet Mary Randolph.

She wrote *The Virginia House-wife* in 1824, and it became the most important Southern cookbook there ever was. She was connected to the Washingtons by marriage and cousin to the Jeffersons, and she ran the most talked-about boarding house in Richmond.

Where Amelia was plain and thrifty, Mary was elegant. This pudding is a perfect example, sweet potatoes made rich with brandy, lemon, and citron, baked in a crust like a pie.

Maggie's version

makes one pie

- ✱ 1 pie crust, in the dish
- ✱ 1 lb sweet potatoes (about 2 cups mashed)
- ✱ 3 eggs, well beaten
- ✱ ¾ cup powdered sugar

- ✱ 6 tbsp butter, softened
- ✱ ½ tsp nutmeg
- ✱ zest of 1 lemon
- ✱ 2 tbsp brandy

Boil the sweet potatoes until very tender, then rice or mash them smooth while hot.

Beat in the eggs, sugar, butter, nutmeg, lemon zest, and brandy until it's a smooth batter.

Pour into the crust and bake at 350°F for about 45 minutes, until set. Sprinkle the top with sugar, and scatter on bits of citron if you have them.

While the oven does its work

This is the South's answer to Amelia's pumpkin pie, and honestly, it can hold its head up.

The sweet potato grew easily in Southern gardens, and Mary dressed it up for the finest table in Virginia.

But my favorite thing is her very last line. She tells you that you *can* make it with Irish potatoes, the ordinary kind, and then adds, "but is not so good."

Even in 1824, in the most gracious cookbook in the South, the sweet potato won. Mary would not pretend otherwise, and I respect her for it.



A Trifle

STRAIGHT FROM MARY RANDOLPH'S BOOK, 1824

To make a Trifle. Put slices of Savoy cake or Naples biscuit at the bottom of a deep dish; wet it with white wine, and fill the dish nearly to the top with rich boiled custard; season half a pint of cream with white wine and sugar; whip it to a froth — as it rises, take it lightly off, and lay it on the custard; pile it up high and tastily — decorate it with preserves of any kind, cut so thin as not to bear the froth down by its weight.

— Mary Randolph, *The Virginia House-wife*, 1824

Now, what is she even saying?

A trifle is the grandest lazy dessert there is, and I mean that as the highest praise. It's layers, and you don't bake a thing.

Cake on the bottom, soaked with wine. A thick custard poured over. Then a cloud of whipped, wine-sweetened cream on top, dabbed with preserves.

"Savoy cake or Naples biscuit" are just old names for sponge cake and ladyfingers. Use either.

Maggie's version

makes one big dish

- ✱ sponge cake or ladyfingers, sliced
- ✱ ½ cup white wine or sherry
- ✱ 2 cups thick custard (or good vanilla pudding)
- ✱ 1 cup cream
- ✱ 2 tbsp sugar, plus a splash of white wine

✱ fruit preserves, for the top

Lay the cake in the bottom of a deep dish and spoon the wine over it until it's soaked.

Pour the custard over the cake, nearly to the top.

Whip the cream with the sugar and a splash of wine to soft peaks, and pile it on. Dot the top with thin little spoonfuls of preserves.

While the oven does its work

No oven again, so let's just admire Mary's instructions, because they're the whole reason I adore her.

"Pile it up high and tastily." Not neatly. Not precisely. *Tastily*. She wanted it to look like abundance.

And then the warning, "decorate it with preserves cut so thin as not to bear the froth down by its weight." She knew you'd get carried away with the jam and flatten your beautiful cloud.

That's 1824 telling you: don't overdo the toppings. Some advice never goes stale.



Floating Island

STRAIGHT FROM MARY RANDOLPH'S BOOK, 1824

Floating Island. Have the bowl nearly full of syllabub, made with milk, white wine, and sugar; beat the whites of six new laid eggs to a strong froth — then mix with it raspberry or strawberry marmalade enough to flavour and colour it; lay the froth lightly on the syllabub, first putting in some slices of cake; raise it in little mounds, and garnish with something light.

— Mary Randolph, *The Virginia House-wife*, 1824

Now, what is she even saying?

This is dessert as theater. A "sea" of pale syllabub in a big bowl, with pink islands of frothed egg white floating on top.

Mary tints her froth with berry preserves, so the islands come out rosy. She tucks slices of cake down in the sea, and raises the froth "in little mounds."

It's meant to look spectacular on the table more than anything. You bring it out and people gasp.

Maggie's version

makes one bowl, serves 6

- ✱ syllabub base: 1½ cups cream, ½ cup milk, ¼ cup white wine, 3 tbsp sugar, whisked frothy
- ✱ slices of sponge cake
- ✱ 3 egg whites
- ✱ 3 tbsp raspberry or strawberry preserves

Pour the frothy syllabub into a wide, shallow bowl and tuck a few slices of cake down into it.

Beat the egg whites to stiff peaks, then gently fold in the preserves so the froth turns rosy pink.

Spoon the pink froth onto the syllabub in little mounds, like islands. Garnish with something light, a berry, a curl of zest.

While the oven does its work

I think of floating island as the showpiece of 1824, the one you made when you wanted the whole table to hush.

There was no photographing your food back then, of course. So the drama was live. You carried it in, and the reward was everyone's face.

Mary's last three words are my favorite kind of instruction. "Garnish with something light." Not what, exactly. Just, whatever's pretty and won't sink.

She trusted her reader to have taste. I try to trust you the same way.



Rice Pudding

STRAIGHT FROM MARY RANDOLPH'S BOOK, 1824

Rice Pudding. Boil half a pound of rice in milk, until it is quite tender; beat it well with a wooden spoon to mash the grains; add three quarters of a pound of sugar, and the same of melted butter; half a nutmeg, six eggs, a gill of wine, and some grated lemon peel; put a paste in the dish, and bake it. For change, it may be boiled, and eaten with butter, sugar, and wine.

— Mary Randolph, *The Virginia House-wife*, 1824

Now, what is she even saying?

Rice pudding is comfort in every century, and Mary's is a proper baked one, set in a pastry crust like a pie.

You cook the rice soft in milk, mash it a little, then enrich it with sugar, butter, eggs, nutmeg, a splash of wine, and lemon.

"A gill of wine" is that half cup again. Old friends, you and I.

Maggie's version

makes one dish, serves 6

- ✱ ¾ cup rice
- ✱ 3 cups milk
- ✱ ½ cup sugar
- ✱ 3 tbsp melted butter
- ✱ ½ tsp nutmeg
- ✱ 3 eggs
- ✱ 2 tbsp wine

- ✱ zest of 1 lemon
 - ✱ 1 pie crust (optional)
-

Cook the rice in the milk over low heat until very tender, then mash it a little with a wooden spoon.

Stir in the sugar, butter, nutmeg, eggs, wine, and lemon zest.

Pour it into a buttered dish (with a crust underneath if you like Mary's way) and bake at 350°F for about 40 minutes, until set.

While the oven does its work

Rice pudding was on so many tables, so often, that it barely counted as a recipe. It was just always there, warm and forgiving.

Which is why I grin at Mary's last line. "For change, it may be boiled."

That was her idea of variety. Rice pudding was such a constant that boiling it instead of baking it counted as an adventure.

Nana Pearl was the same. She made rice pudding every Sunday of my childhood, and "change" meant she'd added a few more raisins than last week.



An Apple Custard

STRAIGHT FROM MARY RANDOLPH'S BOOK, 1824

An Apple Custard. Pare and core twelve pippins, slice them tolerably thick, put a pound of loaf sugar in a stew pan, with a pint of water and twelve cloves: boil and skim it, then put in the apples, and stew them till clear, and but little of the syrup remains—lay them in a deep dish, and take out the cloves; when the apples are cold, pour in a quart of rich boiled custard—set it in water, and make it boil till the custard is set—take care the water does not get into it.

— Mary Randolph, *The Virginia House-wife*, 1824

Now, what is she even saying?

This is two lovely things stacked together. First, spiced stewed apples. Then a blanket of rich custard poured over and gently set.

"Pippins" are just apples, a good tart old variety. She stews them in a clove syrup until they go clear and most of the liquid cooks away.

Then she pulls the cloves out, lays the apples in a dish, pours custard over the cold apples, and sets it all in a water bath so nothing curdles.

Maggie's version

makes one dish, serves 6

- ✱ 6 tart apples, peeled and sliced thick
- ✱ $\frac{3}{4}$ cup sugar
- ✱ 1 cup water
- ✱ 8 whole cloves
- ✱ 2 cups rich custard (or good vanilla pudding), warm

Boil the sugar, water, and cloves together, skim it, then add the apples and stew until they're clear and most of the syrup is gone.

Fish out the cloves and lay the apples in a deep baking dish. Let them cool.

Pour the warm custard over the cold apples. Set the dish in a pan of water and bake at 325°F until the custard is just set, about 40 minutes.

While the oven does its work

America ran on apples. Every farm had an orchard, though truth be told, most of those apples went to cider, not pie.

So Mary's clove-scented apples under a custard blanket were a genteel way to show them off at the table.

And notice she uses twelve cloves. *Twelve*.

The colonial and founding-era sweet tooth loved a bold, warm spice, and cloves were about as bold as it got. We've turned timid since. Mary would tell us to be braver.

CHAPTER 3

Meats, Soups & Pottages

*The pot on the back of the stove, where the real cooking
happened.*



Now we get to the part of the kitchen I love best. The pot.

Bread and pudding are lovely, but a colonial family lived or died by what was simmering on the hearth. A pot could stretch a little meat across a lot of people and a long week.

So this chapter is soups, stews, roasts, and the humble things they called pottages.

Both my cookbook friends are here. Amelia gives us her turkey and her salt cod. But the workhorse of this chapter is Mary Randolph, because that Virginia woman could make a pot of soup sing.

Some of these will look fancy. A calf's head, a whole turtle. Don't let it scare you.

Underneath the old words, it's the same thing your grandmother did. Put good things in a pot, be patient, and let the fire do the rest.

Pull up a chair. Something's always on the stove.



Pepper Pot ★

STRAIGHT FROM MARY RANDOLPH'S BOOK, 1824

Boil two or three pounds of tripe, cut it in pieces, and put it on the fire with a knuckle of veal, and a sufficient quantity of water; part of a pod of pepper, a little spice, sweet herbs according to your taste, salt, and some dumplings; stew it till tender, and thicken the gravy with butter and flour.

— Mary Randolph, *The Virginia House-wife*, 1824

Now, what is she even saying?

This is the famous Philadelphia soup, the one they say kept Washington's army fed through the winter at Valley Forge. Whether that story is true or just good, I'll leave to Theo.

What's true is that it's a thrifty pot. Tripe and a veal knuckle are what you cooked when the fancy cuts were long gone.

"Part of a pod of pepper" is a piece of a hot pepper. And "dumplings" are exactly what you're picturing, little dough balls dropped in to swell up and fill everybody.

Maggie's version

serves 6

- ★ 1 lb honeycomb tripe (or 1½ lbs beef stew chunks if tripe scares your people)
- ★ 1 veal knuckle or 2 lbs meaty veal or beef bones
- ★ 2 potatoes, diced
- ★ 1 onion, chopped
- ★ ½ small hot pepper, minced (or a good pinch of red pepper flakes)

- ✱ 1 tsp thyme, salt and black pepper to taste
 - ✱ 3 tbsp butter mashed with 3 tbsp flour, for thickening
 - ✱ **Dumplings:** 1 cup flour, 1½ tsp baking powder, ½ tsp salt, 1 tbsp butter, about ⅓ cup milk
-

If you're using tripe, rinse it, cover it with water, and simmer it a good hour until it softens before anything else joins the pot.

Add the bones, onion, potato, pepper, and thyme, and let the whole thing simmer low for two hours until the meat surrenders.

Stir your flour-and-butter paste in to thicken the broth. Then pinch off little balls of the dumpling dough, drop them on top, cover the pot, and simmer 15 minutes more until they puff.

While the oven does its work

Here's your Valley Forge story, true or not. The tale goes that the army cook was down to tripe, scraps, and peppercorns, and out of that nothing he made this.

The soldiers called it "the soup that warmed a nation." Philadelphia adopted it, and for two hundred years women sold it steaming from street corners.

It faded out sometime in the last century, which is a shame. A dish that fed a freezing army deserves better than to be forgotten.

So make it once. You'll be cooking a little piece of the Revolution.



To Stuff and Roast a Turkey

STRAIGHT FROM AMELIA'S BOOK, 1796

One pound soft wheat bread, 3 ounces beef suet, 3 eggs, a little sweet thyme, sweet marjoram, pepper and salt, and some add a gill of wine; fill the bird therewith and sew up, hang down to a steady solid fire, basting frequently with salt and water, and roast until a steam emits from the breast, put one third of a pound of butter into the gravy, dust flour over the bird and baste with the gravy; serve up with boiled onions and cranberry-sauce, mangoes, pickles or celery.

— Amelia Simmons, *American Cookery*, 1796

Now, what is she even saying?

This is the first roast turkey recipe printed in America, dressing and all. Read it slow and you'll see it's just how we still do it.

Bread, suet, eggs, and herbs for the stuffing. "Sweet thyme and sweet marjoram" are the plain garden herbs, nothing exotic.

She hangs the bird by a string in front of the fire and turns it, which we thankfully get to skip. And "roast until a steam emits from the breast" is her lovely way of saying roast it till it's done.

Maggie's version

serves 8 to 10

- ✱ 1 turkey, about 12 lbs
- ✱ **Stuffing:** 6 cups torn bread, 4 tbsp butter (in place of suet), 2 eggs, 1 tsp each thyme and marjoram, salt and pepper, splash of white wine
- ✱ ½ cup butter, softened, for the skin
- ✱ Flour, for dusting

✴ To serve: boiled onions, cranberry sauce, pickles

Toss the stuffing together and loosely fill the bird. Don't pack it tight, sweetheart, it needs room to breathe.

Rub the whole turkey with softened butter, salt it well, and set it in a 325°F oven. Baste it every 30 minutes, first with a little salted water, then with the buttery pan juices.

Roast about 3 hours, until a thigh reads 165°F. Dust flour over the breast near the end the way Amelia did, and it browns up beautiful. Rest it 20 minutes before carving.

While the oven does its work

Look at the very last line of her recipe. She serves it with "cramberry-sauce."

That means our Thanksgiving plate, turkey and stuffing and cranberry sauce all together, is over two hundred and thirty years old. Amelia set the table for a holiday that barely existed yet.

She just knew those flavors belonged next to each other. And every November since, the whole country has agreed with her.

Set this out and tell them: this is the original. Everything after was a copy.



Beef à la Mode

STRAIGHT FROM MARY RANDOLPH'S BOOK, 1824

Take the bone from a round of beef, fill the space with a forcemeat made of the crumbs of a stale loaf, four ounces of marrow, two heads of garlic chopped with thyme and parsley, some nutmeg, cloves, pepper and salt, mix it to a paste with the yolks of four eggs beaten, stuff the lean part of the round with it, and make balls of the remainder; sew a fillet of strong linen wide enough to keep it round and compact, put it in a vessel just sufficiently large to hold it, add a pint of red wine, cover it with sheets of tin or iron, set it in a brick oven properly heated, and bake it three hours; when done, skim the fat from the gravy, thicken it with brown flour, add some mushroom and walnut catsup, and serve it up garnished with forcemeat balls fried. It is still better when eaten cold with sallad.

— Mary Randolph, *The Virginia House-wife*, 1824

Now, what is she even saying?

"À la mode" here has nothing to do with ice cream. It's French for "in the fashion," and this was the fashionable Sunday roast.

"Forcemeat" is just a seasoned stuffing you press into the meat. She sews the whole thing up in a strip of linen so it holds its shape, which your kitchen twine does just fine.

And "sallad" is her spelling of salad. She thought it was even better cold the next day, and she was right.

Maggie's version

serves 8

✱ 1 boneless beef round or chuck roast, about 4 lbs

- ✳ **Stuffing:** 1 cup breadcrumbs, 3 cloves garlic minced, 1 tsp thyme, 2 tbsp parsley, ¼ tsp each nutmeg and cloves, salt, pepper, 1 egg yolk, 2 tbsp softened butter (in place of marrow)
- ✳ 2 cups red wine
- ✳ 1 cup beef broth
- ✳ 2 tbsp flour, for thickening

Cut a deep pocket in the roast and pack the stuffing in. Tie it snug with kitchen twine so it stays round.

Brown it on all sides in a heavy pot, then pour in the wine and broth. Cover it tight and set it in a 325°F oven for 3 hours, until a fork slides in easy.

Lift the roast out to rest. Skim the fat, whisk a little flour into the gravy to thicken, and a spoonful of Worcestershire in place of her catsups makes it deep and savory. Slice thin and spoon the gravy over.

While the oven does its work

This is pot roast. Full stop.

Every Sunday roast, every church-supper beef, every "just put it in low and forget about it" dinner traces back to a dish exactly like this one. Mary just dressed it in its Sunday best with garlic and wine and marrow.

The bones of it never changed. Tough cut, long slow heat, patience.

Two hundred years of Sunday dinners, and Mary Randolph wrote the pattern.



Fricassee of Small Chickens

STRAIGHT FROM MARY RANDOLPH'S BOOK, 1824

Take off the legs and wings of four chickens, separate the breasts from the backs, cut off the necks and divide the backs across, clean the gizzards nicely, put them with the livers and other parts of the chicken, after being washed clean, into a sauce pan, add pepper, salt, and a little mace, cover them with water, and stew them till tender — then take them out, thicken half a pint of the water with two table spoonsful of flour rubbed into four ounces of butter, add half a pint of new milk, boil all together a few minutes, then add a gill of white wine, stirring it in carefully that it may not curdle; put the chickens in, and continue to shake the pan until they are sufficiently hot, and serve them up.

— Mary Randolph, *The Virginia House-wife*, 1824

Now, what is she even saying?

A fricassee is chicken gently stewed and then finished in a creamy white sauce. Not fried, not roasted, something softer than both.

She cuts up the birds, simmers them tender in seasoned water, then builds a gravy right from that cooking liquid with butter, flour, and milk.

"A gill of white wine" is about a quarter cup. Her one warning, "stirring it in carefully that it may not curdle," is the whole trick, so listen to her.

Maggie's version

serves 4

- * 1 chicken, cut into pieces (about 3 lbs), or 2 lbs pieces
- * 1 tsp salt, ½ tsp pepper, ¼ tsp mace or nutmeg
- * 4 tbsp butter

- ✱ 3 tbsp flour
- ✱ 1 cup whole milk
- ✱ ¼ cup white wine

Put the chicken in a pot, season with the salt, pepper, and mace, cover with water, and simmer gently 30 minutes until tender. Lift the pieces out and save a cup of the broth.

In a clean pan, melt the butter, stir in the flour, and cook it a minute. Whisk in the reserved broth and the milk, and stir until it thickens into a smooth gravy.

Now the careful part. Pour the wine in slowly, off a hard boil, stirring so it doesn't split. Slide the chicken back in, warm it through, and serve it over rice or biscuits.

While the oven does its work

This was the company dish. Fried chicken was everyday, but fricassee was what you made when the preacher came to Sunday dinner.

It's gentle and pale and a little old-fashioned, and that's exactly its charm. Mary's version is nearly identical to the one your great-great-grandmother would have called simply "creamed chicken."

The word fricassee sounds fussy. The dish is anything but.

It's comfort in a pan, and it always was.



Beef Soup

STRAIGHT FROM MARY RANDOLPH'S BOOK, 1824

Take the hind shin of beef, cut off all the flesh off the leg-bone, which must be taken away entirely, or the soup will be greasy... pour on three quarts of water, cover the pot close, and keep it gently and steadily boiling five hours... Just before you take it up, brown it in the following manner: put a small table-spoonful of nice brown sugar into an iron skillet, set it on the fire and stir it till it melts and looks very dark, pour into it a ladle full of the soup... Strain this browning and mix it well with the soup.

— Mary Randolph, *The Virginia House-wife*, 1824

Now, what is she even saying?

This is the honest, everyday pot of soup, and Mary's directions are so clear you could hand them to a child.

Shin of beef, onions, carrots, turnips, three quarts of water, and five slow hours. That's the whole meal.

But watch what she does at the end. She burns a spoon of sugar in a hot skillet until it goes dark, then stirs it into the soup. That's her trick for a deep brown color and a mellow, almost caramel bottom note.

Maggie's version

serves 6

- ✱ 2 lbs beef shin or shank, meat and marrow bone
- ✱ 3 quarts water
- ✱ 3 onions, chopped
- ✱ 6 carrots, sliced

- ✳ 2 turnips, diced
- ✳ 1 tsp black pepper, 2 tsp salt
- ✳ A bundle of thyme and parsley
- ✳ 1 cup celery, chopped
- ✳ 1 tbsp brown sugar, for the browning

Put the beef, water, onions, carrots, turnips, salt, and pepper in a big pot. Bring it up gently and let it simmer, skimming the foam, for about 4 hours.

Add the celery and the herb bundle for the last hour so they keep their freshness.

Now Mary's flourish. Melt the brown sugar in a small skillet until it's dark and just short of burnt, stir in a ladle of broth, then pour that back into the pot. Fish out the herbs, and serve with toasted bread cubes.

While the oven does its work

That burnt-sugar trick is a little piece of genius, and I want you to notice it.

Before there was a bottle of gravy browning on the store shelf, this is how every good cook got that rich brown color. She made it herself, from a spoonful of sugar and thirty seconds of nerve.

Two hundred years later, the bottled stuff in your cabinet is doing the exact same job. Mary just did it with her own two hands.

Old cooks weren't simple. They were resourceful, which is a much finer thing.



Ochra Soup

STRAIGHT FROM MARY RANDOLPH'S BOOK, 1824

Get two double handfuls of young ochra, wash and slice it thin, add two onions chopped fine, put it into a gallon of water at a very early hour in an earthen pipkin, or very nice iron pot; it must be kept steadily simmering, but not boiling: put in pepper and salt. At 12 o'clock, put in a handful of Lima beans; at half-past one o'clock, add three young cimlins cleaned and cut in small pieces, a fowl, or knuckle of veal, a bit of bacon or pork that has been boiled, and six tomatos, with the skin taken off; when nearly done, thicken with a spoonful of butter, mixed with one of flour. Have rice boiled to eat with it.

— Mary Randolph, *The Virginia House-wife*, 1824

Now, what is she even saying?

"Ochra" is okra, and this soup is one of the most important recipes in the whole book, so lean in.

She's precise as a clock. Start it early, add the Lima beans at noon, the squash and meat at half-past one. "Cimlins" are little pattypan squash.

It simmers all day, thickens with the okra itself, and gets served over rice. If that's ringing a bell, it should. This is gumbo, before it had the name.

Maggie's version

serves 6

- ✱ 1 lb okra, sliced thin
- ✱ 2 onions, chopped
- ✱ 1 smoked ham hock or ½ lb bacon
- ✱ 1 chicken thigh or a veal bone

- ✱ 1 cup Lima beans
- ✱ 2 yellow squash, diced
- ✱ 4 tomatoes, peeled and chopped
- ✱ Salt, pepper
- ✱ 1 tbsp butter mashed with 1 tbsp flour
- ✱ Cooked rice, to serve

Put the okra, onions, and smoked meat in a big pot with about two quarts of water. Bring it up gentle and keep it at a bare simmer, not a hard boil.

After an hour or so, add the Lima beans. Half an hour later, the squash, chicken, and tomatoes. Let the whole thing go soft and thick over two to three hours.

Stir the butter-and-flour paste in at the end to pull it together. Spoon it into bowls over a scoop of white rice.

While the oven does its work

Here's the history I most want you to carry out of this chapter. Okra is not a European vegetable. It came to America from West Africa, carried in the hands and the memory of enslaved people.

This soup is their invention. The rice underneath it, the okra thickening it, the whole idea of it, is African cooking that became Southern cooking that became American cooking.

Mary Randolph put it in her Virginia cookbook in 1824. It grew up into the gumbo of New Orleans.

So when you stir this pot, you're tasting one of the truest American stories there is. Set that in front of your grandchildren and tell them where it came from.



Catfish Soup

STRAIGHT FROM MARY RANDOLPH'S BOOK, 1824

Take two large or four small white catfish that have been caught in deep water, cut off the heads, and skin and clean the bodies; cut each in three parts, put them in a pot, with a pound of lean bacon, a large onion cut up, a handful of parsley chopped small, some pepper and salt, pour in a sufficient quantity of water, and stew them till the fish are quite tender but not broken; beat the yolks of four fresh eggs, add to them a large spoonful of butter, two of flour, and half a pint of rich milk; make all these warm and thicken the soup, take out the bacon, and put some of the fish in your tureen, pour in the soup, and serve it up.

— Mary Randolph, *The Virginia House-wife*, 1824

Now, what is she even saying?

Mary titled this one with a little note I adore. She called it "an excellent dish for those who have not imbibed a needless prejudice against those delicious fish."

In other words, quit turning your nose up at catfish. She's right.

It's a creamy river-fish chowder. Catfish, bacon, onion, and parsley simmered together, then thickened at the end with egg yolks, butter, and milk into something rich and silky.

Maggie's version

serves 4

- * 1½ lbs catfish fillets, cut in chunks
- * ½ lb bacon, in one piece if you can
- * 1 large onion, chopped
- * Handful of parsley, chopped

- ✱ Salt, pepper
- ✱ 2 egg yolks
- ✱ 1 tbsp butter, 2 tbsp flour
- ✱ 1 cup whole milk

Put the catfish, bacon, onion, and parsley in a pot, cover with water, and simmer gently until the fish is tender, maybe 20 minutes. Handle it soft so the fish doesn't break apart.

Whisk the egg yolks, milk, butter, and flour together in a bowl until smooth.

Take the pot off a hard boil, then stir the egg mixture in slowly, and let it warm and thicken without boiling or it'll curdle. Pull out the bacon, and ladle it up.

While the oven does its work

I love this recipe most for that little sass in the title. "A needless prejudice against those delicious fish."

Two hundred years ago, a fine Virginia lady was already tired of people acting too good for catfish. Some arguments never end.

But she was fighting for something real. In river country, catfish was what you could actually catch, and a cook who could make it elegant was worth her weight.

Don't be a snob at the supper table. Mary said so first.



Mock Turtle Soup of Calf's Head

STRAIGHT FROM MARY RANDOLPH'S BOOK, 1824

Have a large head cleaned nicely without taking off the skin, divide the chop from the front of the head, take out the tongue... put on the head with a gallon of water, the hock of a ham or a piece of nice pork, four or five onions, thyme, parsley, cloves and nutmeg, pepper and salt, boil all these together until the flesh on the head is quite tender, then take it up, cut all into small pieces, take the eyes out carefully, strain the water in which it was boiled, add half a pint of wine and a gill of mushroom catsup, let it boil slowly till reduced to two quarts, thicken it with two spoonsful of browned flour rubbed into four ounces of butter, put the meat in, and after stewing it a short time, serve it up. The eyes are a great delicacy.

— Mary Randolph, *The Virginia House-wife*, 1824

Now, what is she even saying?

All right. Nobody panic. There's no turtle in this, and that's the whole joke of the name.

Real turtle soup was the grand luxury dish of the 1700s. Turtles were expensive and hard to get, so thrifty cooks learned to fake the same rich, meaty soup using a calf's head, which was cheap. "Mock" turtle. A clever imitation.

I am not going to make you buy a calf's head. We'll get the same deep, savory soup from good beef and a few sensible tricks.

Maggie's version

serves 6

- ✱ 2 lbs beef chuck or veal, cubed
- ✱ 1 smoked ham hock

- * 4 onions, chopped
- * 1 tsp thyme, ¼ tsp each cloves and nutmeg, salt, pepper
- * Handful of parsley
- * ½ cup red wine
- * 2 tbsp Worcestershire (in place of mushroom catsup)
- * 3 tbsp butter mashed with 3 tbsp browned flour
- * 2 hard-boiled eggs, chopped, to serve

Put the beef, ham hock, onions, herbs, and spices in a pot with about three quarts of water. Simmer it low and patient for two to three hours, until everything is fall-apart tender.

Skim it, then stir in the wine and Worcestershire and let it reduce a while into something dark and glossy.

Thicken it with the browned-flour-and-butter paste. Mary served hers garnished with the calf's eyes, "a great delicacy." We'll use chopped hard-boiled egg, which gives the same look and won't clear the table.

While the oven does its work

That last line of hers gets me every time. "The eyes are a great delicacy."

She wrote it as plain as buttering toast, because to her it was. Nothing was wasted, and nothing was too strange for the pot. A calf's head fed the family and the head cook ate well.

We're softer now, and that's fine. But there's real wisdom in the old way, in a kitchen where nothing good ever got thrown out.

Make my gentler version. But tell them about the eyes. Watch Mason go pale.



To Dress Salt Codfish

STRAIGHT FROM AMELIA'S BOOK, 1796

Put the fish first into cold water and wash it, then hang it over the fire and soak it six hours in scalding water, then shift it into clean warm water, and let it scald for one hour, it will be much better than to boil.

— Amelia Simmons, *American Cookery*, 1796

Now, what is she even saying?

Before refrigerators, cod was preserved stiff as a board in salt, and half the job was getting the salt back out.

That's all this recipe is. Amelia's method for reviving salt cod, soaking and gently scalding rather than hard boiling, so it comes back tender instead of tough.

"Scald" means keep it in water just below a boil. Her one strong opinion, "much better than to boil," is a cook telling you not to bully the fish.

Maggie's version

serves 4

- ✱ 1 lb salt cod
- ✱ 4 potatoes
- ✱ 1 onion, sliced
- ✱ 4 tbsp butter
- ✱ Black pepper
- ✱ Splash of cream

Soak the salt cod in cold water for a full day, changing the water three or four times, to draw the salt out. This is the step you cannot rush, sweetheart.

Then, as Amelia says, gently poach it in barely-simmering water, never a hard boil, until it flakes soft. Drain it and flake it up.

Boil and mash the potatoes with butter and a splash of cream. Soften the onion in butter, fold the flaked cod through, and pile it over the mash with plenty of pepper. This is the New England Saturday supper, plain and good.

While the oven does its work

Salt cod built New England. That's not an exaggeration, it's the plain truth.

The whole colonial economy of Massachusetts floated on dried cod, shipped all over the world. They even hung a carved wooden codfish in the statehouse, and it's still there, because the fish paid for everything.

For everyday families, a board of salt cod in the pantry meant protein through any winter. This humble soaked-and-flaked supper fed the coast for generations.

One dried fish, one wooden statue, one whole New England. Now that's a thing worth remembering.



Dried Pea Soup

STRAIGHT FROM MARY RANDOLPH'S BOOK, 1824

Take one quart of split peas, or Lima beans, which are better; put them in three quarts of very soft water with three onions chopped up, pepper and salt; boil them two hours; mash them well and pass them through a sieve; return the liquid into the pot, thicken it with a large piece of butter and flour, put in some slices of nice salt pork, and a large tea-spoonful of celery seed pounded; boil it till the pork is done, and serve it up; have some toasted bread cut into dice and fried in butter, which must be put in the tureen before you pour in the soup.

— Mary Randolph, *The Virginia House-wife*, 1824

Now, what is she even saying?

This is the true pottage, the oldest, humblest, most honest pot in the whole book, and I saved it for last on purpose.

Split peas, water, onion, a bit of salt pork. That's poverty food, and it's also some of the best soup you'll ever eat.

She boils the peas soft, mashes them smooth, and enriches the whole thing with pork and butter. The fried bread croutons at the bottom of the bowl are the little luxury on top.

Maggie's version

serves 6

- ✱ 1 lb dried split peas
- ✱ 3 onions, chopped
- ✱ 6 cups water
- ✱ ½ lb salt pork or a ham bone

- ✱ 2 tbsp butter mashed with 1 tbsp flour
- ✱ 1 tsp celery seed
- ✱ Salt, pepper
- ✱ Bread cubes fried in butter, to serve

Rinse the split peas and put them in a pot with the onions, water, salt pork, and a good grind of pepper. Simmer them, stirring now and then, for about two hours until the peas fall apart.

Mash them smooth against the side of the pot, or blend if you like it silky. Stir in the butter-and-flour and the celery seed to round it out.

Fry a handful of bread cubes crisp in butter. Put them in the bottom of each bowl, then ladle the hot soup right over. That's the whole trick, and it's a good one.

While the oven does its work

You know this one already. "Pease porridge hot, pease porridge cold, pease porridge in the pot, nine days old."

That nursery rhyme is about this exact soup. "Pease" is the old word for peas, and porridge was pottage, and this humble pot was so common they sang about it to babies.

The rhyme is right about one thing, too. This soup really is good nine days old. It only gets better in the pot.

So this is where we started, long before Amelia or Mary. A handful of dried peas, a little water, and a family fed. That's the whole history of cooking, right there in a bowl.

CHAPTER 4

Preserves, Pickles & Sauces

How they made summer last all the way to spring.



Now here's a chapter that will change how you see your own pantry.

There were no refrigerators, sweetheart. None. When the garden came in all at once in August, a woman had one job: catch it before it spoiled.

So she pickled, and preserved, and bottled, and put by. A full pantry in October was the difference between a comfortable winter and a hungry one.

This is also the chapter where I get to solve a couple of mysteries for you. Why "ketchup" used to have no tomatoes. Why Americans call a stuffed pepper a "mango."

Both answers are hiding right here in these old recipes.

Mary Randolph leads most of this chapter, because that woman could put up anything that grew. Amelia lends us two of her own.

Get your jars ready. We're saving summer.



Mushroom Catsup

STRAIGHT FROM MARY RANDOLPH'S BOOK, 1824

Take the flaps of the proper mushrooms from the stems—wash them, add some salt, and crush them; then boil them some time, strain them through a cloth, put them on the fire again with salt to your taste, a few cloves of garlic, and a quarter of an ounce of cloves pounded, to a peck of mushrooms; boil it till reduced to less than half the original quantity—bottle and cork it well.

— Mary Randolph, *The Virginia House-wife*, 1824

Now, what is she even saying?

Read that word again. Catsup. And notice there is not one tomato in the whole recipe.

This is the secret nobody tells you. For most of history, "catsup" (or ketchup) did not mean tomato sauce at all. It meant any dark, salty, bottled sauce you shook onto your dinner.

Mushroom was the most famous kind. You salt mushrooms, crush them, boil them down with garlic and cloves into a thin black savory liquid, and bottle it.

Maggie's version

makes about 1 cup

-  1 lb mushrooms, sliced
-  1 tbsp salt
-  2 cloves garlic
-  ¼ tsp ground cloves
-  Splash of vinegar (to help it keep)

Toss the mushrooms with the salt and let them sit a few hours until they weep out their dark juice. Then crush them right in the bowl.

Simmer the whole lot, juice and all, with the garlic and cloves for about 30 minutes. Strain it through a cloth, pressing hard to get every drop.

Return the liquid to the pot and boil it down by half until it's dark and intense. Bottle it, keep it in the fridge, and shake a spoonful into soups, stews, and gravies. It's pure savory depth.

While the oven does its work

Here is the whole history of ketchup in one breath. The word came from a fermented fish sauce in Southeast Asia. English sailors brought the idea home and made their own with mushrooms and walnuts.

For two hundred years, "ketchup" meant this. A thin, dark, funky sauce. If you'd handed Mary Randolph a bottle of the sweet red stuff, she wouldn't have known what to call it.

The tomato was the upstart that eventually stole the name. We'll meet it in the very next recipe.

So this bottle, this mushroom one, is the real original. Everything on your fridge door is the impostor.



Tomato Catsup

STRAIGHT FROM MARY RANDOLPH'S BOOK, 1824

Gather a peck of tomatos, pick out the stems, and wash them; put them on the fire without water, sprinkle on a few spoonful of salt, let them boil steadily an hour, stirring them frequently; strain them through a colander, and then through a sieve; put the liquid on the fire with half a pint of chopped onions, half a quarter of an ounce of mace broke into small pieces; and if not sufficiently salt, add a little more — one table-spoonful of whole black pepper; boil all together until just enough to fill two bottles; cork it tight. Make it in August, in dry weather.

— Mary Randolph, *The Virginia House-wife*, 1824

Now, what is she even saying?

And here is the newcomer that would win. This is one of the earliest American recipes for tomato ketchup, and it looks almost nothing like the bottle you know.

No sugar. No vinegar to speak of. Just tomatoes cooked down with onion, mace, salt, and pepper into a savory sauce.

Her last line is the loveliest instruction in the book. "Make it in August, in dry weather." She's telling you to catch the tomatoes at their peak and put them up.

Maggie's version

makes about 2 cups

- ✱ 3 lbs ripe tomatoes, quartered
- ✱ 1 tsp salt
- ✱ ½ cup chopped onion
- ✱ ¼ tsp ground mace

- ✱ 1 tsp whole black peppercorns
 - ✱ (A little sugar and vinegar if your modern tongue wants it)
-

Cook the tomatoes down over medium heat, no water, stirring often, for about an hour until they collapse. Pass them through a sieve to leave the skins and seeds behind.

Return the smooth liquid to the pot with the onion, mace, salt, and peppercorns. Simmer it low and patient until it thickens to a sauce.

Taste it as Mary made it, savory and pure. Then, if you like, add a spoon of sugar and a splash of vinegar to nudge it toward what your family expects. Either way, keep it in the fridge.

While the oven does its work

Look what's missing, and you'll understand a whole culture shift. There's no sugar and barely any vinegar. Mary's ketchup was a savory sauce, not a sweet one.

For decades the tomato version fought the mushroom and walnut ones for the name. Then in the late 1800s a fellow named Henry Heinz started bottling a sweet, tangy, shelf-stable tomato version, and that was that.

Sugar won. The tomato took the crown and the word "ketchup" both.

Make Mary's, and taste ketchup from before Heinz got hold of it. It's a different sauce entirely, and I think it's the better one.



To Pickle Cucumbers

STRAIGHT FROM MARY RANDOLPH'S BOOK, 1824

Gather them full grown, but quite young — take off the green rind, and slice them tolerably thick; put a layer in a deep dish, strew over it some chopped onion and salt; do this until they are all in; sprinkle salt on the top, let them stand six hours, put them in a colander — when all the liquor has run off, put them in a pot; strew a little cayenne pepper over each layer, and cover them with strong cold vinegar; when the pot is full, pour on some sweet oil, and tie it up close; at the end of a fortnight, pour off the first vinegar, and put on fresh.

— Mary Randolph, *The Virginia House-wife*, 1824

Now, what is she even saying?

This is just a good old-fashioned pickle, and it's simpler than it reads.

Slice your cucumbers, salt them with chopped onion, and let them sit six hours so the salt pulls the water out. That draining step is what keeps a pickle crisp instead of soggy.

Then drain them, layer them with cayenne, and cover with cold vinegar. Her trick of pouring off the first vinegar and adding fresh after two weeks makes them keep clean and bright.

Maggie's version

makes 1 quart

- ✱ 4 cucumbers, peeled and sliced thick
- ✱ 1 onion, chopped
- ✱ 2 tbsp salt
- ✱ ¼ tsp cayenne

✿ 2 cups vinegar

✿ 1 tbsp oil

Layer the cucumber slices and chopped onion in a bowl, salting each layer. Let them stand six hours, then drain off every bit of liquid in a colander.

Pack them into a clean jar, sprinkling a little cayenne between layers. Pour cold vinegar over to cover, then float a spoon of oil on top to seal out air.

Refrigerate. After two weeks, drain and cover with fresh vinegar, and they'll stay crisp for months. Cold, sharp, and snappy with a summer supper.

While the oven does its work

Notice she doesn't boil anything. This is a cold pickle, and that's the point.

Boiling makes cucumbers go limp. The old cooks knew that keeping everything cold, and drawing the water out with salt first, was the whole secret to a pickle that actually crunches.

You've eaten a thousand pickles from a jar. This is the method behind every one of them, worked out by hand a long time before a factory got involved.

Simple food, done with care. That's most of what these old books are trying to teach us.



To Make Mangoes of Melons

STRAIGHT FROM AMELIA'S BOOK, 1796

Take green melons, as many as you please, and make a brine strong enough to bear an egg; then pour it boiling hot on the melons, keeping them down under the brine; let them stand five or six days; then take them out, slit them down on one side, take out all the seeds, scrape them well in the inside, and wash them clean with cold water; then take a clove of a garlick, a little ginger and nutmeg sliced, and a little whole pepper; put all these proportionably into the melons, filling them up with mustard-seeds; then lay them in an earthern pot with the slit upwards, and take one part of mustard and two parts of vinegar, enough to cover them, pouring it upon them scalding hot, and keep them close slopped.

— Amelia Simmons, *American Cookery*, 1796

Now, what is she even saying?

Here is the mystery I promised you. Ever heard an old-timer call a stuffed bell pepper a "mango"? This recipe is why.

Real mango fruit was a rare, exotic thing that only ever reached the colonies pickled in jars. So to Americans, "mango" stopped meaning the fruit and started meaning any hollowed-out, stuffed, pickled vegetable.

Amelia hollows out little green melons, packs them full of garlic, spice, and mustard seed, and pickles them. A "mango" made of melon.

Maggie's version

makes about 4

- ✱ 4 small green melons (or firm cucumbers, or small bell peppers)
- ✱ Strong salt brine (enough salt in water to float an egg)

- ✱ 2 cloves garlic, sliced
- ✱ 1 tsp mustard seed per melon
- ✱ Pinch each of ginger, nutmeg, whole pepper
- ✱ 1 cup vinegar mixed with 2 tbsp dry mustard

Soak the melons in the salt brine for five days to firm and cure them. Then slit each one, scoop out the seeds, and rinse them clean.

Stuff each cavity with the garlic, spices, and a good spoon of mustard seed. Tie or skewer them shut so the filling stays put.

Pack them in a jar, slit-side up, and pour the mustard vinegar over to cover. Give them a couple of weeks. They come out sharp, spicy, and unlike anything in a modern store.

While the oven does its work

So the next time your great-aunt asks you to pass the "mangoes" and points at the stuffed peppers, you'll know.

For two hundred years in America, "to mango" was a verb. It meant to hollow out and stuff-pickle a vegetable, exactly like this.

The word drifted so far from the fruit that when real mangoes finally became common, plenty of folks were confused about which was which. Language is a funny, living thing.

One little pickled melon, and a whole word makes sense. Tell that one at Thanksgiving.



To Pickle Nastertiums

STRAIGHT FROM MARY RANDOLPH'S BOOK, 1824

Gather the berries when full grown but young, put them in a pot, pour boiling salt and water on, and let them stand three or four days; then drain off the water, and cover them with cold vinegar; add a few blades of mace, and whole grains of black pepper.

— Mary Randolph, *The Virginia House-wife*, 1824

Now, what is she even saying?

This is one of my favorite little tricks in the whole book. You know the nasturtium, that cheerful orange flower climbing the fence? After it blooms, it leaves behind small green seed pods.

Mary pickles those pods. Brine them a few days, then cover with cold vinegar, mace, and pepper.

What you get are little green nuggets that taste peppery and sharp, almost exactly like capers.

Maggie's version

makes a small jar

- ✱ 1 cup nasturtium seed pods, young and green
- ✱ Salt water brine
- ✱ 1 cup vinegar
- ✱ A few blades of mace
- ✱ 1 tsp whole black peppercorns

Gather the green pods after the flowers fade. Cover them with boiling salt water and let them stand three or four days.

Drain them, then pack them in a small jar. Cover with cold vinegar and tuck in the mace and peppercorns.

Give them two weeks. Use them anywhere you'd use capers, on fish, in a sauce, on a deviled egg. Free capers from your own garden fence.

While the oven does its work

This is colonial thriftiness at its most charming. Capers had to be shipped from the Mediterranean and cost a fortune.

But nasturtiums grew like weeds in any American dooryard. Some clever cook noticed the pickled pods tasted just like the pricey imported thing, and there you go. The poor woman's caper.

Nothing wasted, everything used, even the seed pods of a flower. That was the whole colonial genius.

Plant nasturtiums next spring. Then pickle your own capers and feel very, very smart.



Quince Marmalade

STRAIGHT FROM MARY RANDOLPH'S BOOK, 1824

Boil the quinces in water until soft, let them cool, and rub all the pulp through a sieve: put two pounds of it to one of sugar... pick out the seeds, tie them in a muslin bag, and boil them with the marmalade: when it is a thick jelly, take out the seeds, and put it in pots.

— Mary Randolph, *The Virginia House-wife*, 1824

Now, what is she even saying?

Here's another word with a hidden history. "Marmalade" today means orange, but it didn't start that way.

The very first marmalades were made from quince, that hard, fragrant, old-fashioned fruit. Mary boils quinces soft, sieves the pulp, and cooks it with sugar into a thick jelly.

Her clever step is tying the seeds in a muslin bag and boiling them right in the pot. Quince seeds are loaded with natural pectin, so they set the marmalade firm without anything from a box.

Maggie's version

makes 2 jars

- ✱ 4 quinces (or hard, tart apples if you can't find quince)
- ✱ Sugar (2 parts pulp to 1 part sugar by weight)
- ✱ The seeds, tied in a scrap of cheesecloth

Boil the whole quinces until a knife slides in easy, then let them cool. Peel, core, and push the soft flesh through a sieve, saving the seeds.

Weigh the pulp, add half its weight in sugar, and put it all in a pot with the seed bag tucked in.

Cook it down, stirring, until it turns deep rosy pink and mounds up thick on the spoon. Pull out the seed bag and spoon it into jars. It sets beautifully on toast.

While the oven does its work

Watch the color as it cooks, because it's a small miracle. Quince flesh goes into the pot pale yellow, and comes out a deep, glowing rose-pink.

That transformation is pure chemistry, and the old cooks loved it long before they could explain it. A homely, knobby, inedible-raw fruit becomes a jewel-colored jelly.

And that word, marmalade, rode all the way from quince to orange to your breakfast table. The Portuguese word for quince is *marmelo*. That's where the whole thing started.

So this rosy jar is the original marmalade, from the fruit that gave it its name.



Apple Sauce

STRAIGHT FROM MARY RANDOLPH'S BOOK, 1824

Pare, core and slice some apples; put them in a sauce pan, with as much water as will keep them from burning, set them over a very slow fire, keep them closely covered till reduced to a pulp, then put in a lump of butter, and sugar to your taste, beat them well, and send them to the table in a china bowl.

— Mary Randolph, *The Virginia House-wife*, 1824

Now, what is she even saying?

Mary tucked this in under the title "sauce for a goose," but don't let that fool you. This is plain, honest applesauce, and it hasn't changed one bit.

Peel and slice apples, cook them low and slow with a splash of water so they don't scorch, and let them fall to a pulp.

Then a lump of butter, sugar to taste, and a good beating. That's the whole thing. Two hundred years, and not a thing to improve.

Maggie's version

makes about 3 cups

- ✱ 6 apples, peeled, cored, sliced
- ✱ ¼ cup water
- ✱ 2 tbsp butter
- ✱ Sugar to taste
- ✱ (A pinch of cinnamon, between us)

Put the apples and water in a pot, cover it tight, and cook over low heat, stirring now and then, until they slump into a soft pulp.

Stir in the butter and as much sugar as your apples need. Beat it smooth, or leave it chunky if that's your family's way.

Serve it warm alongside pork or a goose the way Mary did, or cold in a bowl for the little ones. Ruby eats it faster than I can make it.

While the oven does its work

I put this humble little sauce in on purpose, right between the fancy pickles.

Because here's the truth of these old cookbooks. For every showy calf's-head soup, there were a hundred pots of something plain and good like this. Applesauce, cooked down slow on the back of the stove.

This is the recipe that proves the point. Some things were perfect the first time and simply never needed changing.

That butter is the whole secret, by the way. A lump of butter in your applesauce. Try it once and you'll never go back.



To Preserve Gooseberries, Damsons, or Plums

STRAIGHT FROM AMELIA'S BOOK, 1796

Gather them when dry, full grown, and not ripe; pick them one by one, put them into glass bottles that are very clean and dry, and cork them close with new corks; then put a kettle of water on the fire, and put in the bottles with care; wet not the corks, but let the water come up to the necks; make a gentle fire till they are a little codled and turn white; do not take them up till cold, then pitch the corks all over, or wax them close and thick; then set them in a cool dry cellar.

— Amelia Simmons, *American Cookery*, 1796

Now, what is she even saying?

This one is quietly astonishing, so read it twice. Amelia is describing home canning, decades before there were canning jars.

She puts fruit in clean bottles, corks them, and stands them in a kettle of water. Then she heats the water gently to cook the fruit inside the sealed bottle.

"Codled" means gently cooked. Then she waxes the corks airtight and cellars them. That is the water-bath canning method, worked out by hand in 1796.

Maggie's version

makes 2 jars

- ✱ Gooseberries, damsons, or small plums, firm and just underripe
- ✱ Clean canning jars with new lids

Pick firm, dry, slightly underripe fruit and pack it into very clean jars. Loosely seal them.

Stand the jars in a deep pot on a folded towel, and fill the pot with water up to the necks of the jars. Bring it up gently, never a rolling boil, until the fruit softens and pales.

Let everything cool completely in the water before you lift the jars out and seal them tight. Store them somewhere cool and dark. Come January, you'll open summer.

While the oven does its work

Sit with this for a second. There's a myth that "canning" was invented by a Frenchman for Napoleon's army around 1810.

But here is Amelia Simmons, an American woman, publishing the very same principle in 1796. Seal the food, heat it, keep the air out.

She didn't know about bacteria. She didn't have the science. She just knew, from generations of women before her, that this was how you cheated winter.

That's the thing I most want you to take from this whole book. These women were brilliant. They just never got the credit, so we're giving it to them now.



Walnut Catsup

STRAIGHT FROM MARY RANDOLPH'S BOOK, 1824

Gather the walnuts as for pickling, and keep them in salt and water the same time; then pound them in a marble mortar—to every dozen walnuts, put a quart of vinegar; stir them well every day for a week, then put them in a bag, and press all the liquor through; to each quart, put a tea-spoonful of pounded cloves, and one of mace, with six cloves of garlic—boil it fifteen or twenty minutes, and bottle it.

— Mary Randolph, *The Virginia House-wife*, 1824

Now, what is she even saying?

And here's the third catsup, to close the mystery we opened. Mushroom, tomato, and now walnut.

She uses green, unripe walnuts, the whole soft nut before the shell hardens. Salt them, crush them, steep them in vinegar for a week, then press out and bottle the dark liquor with cloves, mace, and garlic.

It comes out black, sharp, and deeply savory. Another bottled sauce that would have proudly worn the name "ketchup" on any colonial table.

Maggie's version

makes about 2 cups

- ✱ Green (unripe) walnuts are hard to find, so: ½ cup chopped walnuts as a stand-in
- ✱ 2 cups vinegar
- ✱ 1 tsp ground cloves
- ✱ 1 tsp mace
- ✱ 4 cloves garlic

✳ 1 tbsp salt, plus a splash of Worcestershire for depth

If you can find soft green walnuts, use Mary's method exactly. For the rest of us, simmer chopped walnuts in the vinegar with the salt for 20 minutes to draw out their dark, tannic flavor.

Add the cloves, mace, and garlic, and simmer another 15 minutes until it's dark and fragrant. A splash of Worcestershire brings it close to the real thing.

Strain and bottle it. Shake it into gravies, stews, and pan sauces the way you would the mushroom one. Keep it in the fridge.

While the oven does its work

So there you have all three, side by side. Mushroom, tomato, walnut, and every one of them called catsup.

That's the whole point I've been building to. "Ketchup" was never a specific thing. It was a category, a whole shelf of dark savory bottles a cook reached for to deepen a dish.

The tomato just happened to win the popularity contest and keep the name for itself. The other two faded into history.

But now you know the family tree. And you can tell your grandkids that ketchup used to be made of mushrooms and walnuts, and watch them refuse to believe you.



Pepper Vinegar

STRAIGHT FROM MARY RANDOLPH'S BOOK, 1824

Get one dozen pods of pepper when ripe, take out the stems, and cut them in two; put them in a kettle with three pints of vinegar, boil it away to one quart, and strain it through a sieve. A little of this is excellent in gravy of every kind, and gives a flavour greatly superior to black pepper; it is also very fine when added to each of the various catsups for fish sauce.

— Mary Randolph, *The Virginia House-wife*, 1824

Now, what is she even saying?

Keep a bottle of this on your table, sweetheart, and you'll understand the whole American South in one splash.

Mary takes a dozen ripe hot peppers, cuts them up, and boils them down in vinegar until it's concentrated and fiery. Then she strains it clear and bottles it.

That's it. Peppers and vinegar. And it is the direct ancestor of every bottle of hot sauce you have ever shaken.

Maggie's version

makes about 2 cups

- ✱ 10 to 12 fresh red hot peppers (cayenne, red chili, or Tabasco-type)
- ✱ 3 cups vinegar (white or cider)
- ✱ A pinch of salt

Stem the peppers and cut them in half, seeds and all if you like real heat. Handle them careful, and don't rub your eyes, I mean it.

Put them in a pot with the vinegar and a little salt. Simmer it, uncovered, until it reduces down by about a third and turns fragrant and sharp.

Strain out the peppers and bottle the vinegar. A few drops wakes up a pot of greens, a gravy, or a plate of fish. It keeps for months in the cupboard.

While the oven does its work

Read Mary's own words again. "A flavour greatly superior to black pepper." She was not shy about it.

Here is the history to carry with you. This little bottle is the grandmother of American hot sauce. Long before a fellow in Louisiana bottled the famous red stuff in 1868, Southern cooks already kept exactly this on every table.

Go into a good country kitchen down South today and you will still find a bottle of "pepper sauce," peppers steeping in vinegar, sitting right next to the salt. It never left.

So this is not a lost recipe at all. It is a living one, two hundred years old and still splashed on collard greens this very night. Some good things, once found, we simply never put down.

CHAPTER 5

Drinks & Small Beer

What they poured when the well water wasn't enough.



Here we are at the last chapter, and I've saved something fun for the end. Drinks.

Now, "small beer" is going to confuse you, so let me clear it up right away. It doesn't mean a little glass of beer.

"Small beer" was the everyday table drink, brewed very light and mild, and the whole family drank it, children too. In a time when plain water could make you sick, a gently brewed molasses or ginger drink was the safer pour.

That's the world these recipes come from. Shrubs, cordials, ginger beer, a honey mead as old as the pharaohs.

I'm a grandmother, and I make these for grandchildren, so every modern version in this chapter is one you can hand to a seven-year-old. Sparkling, fruity, and honest.

The history I'll give you straight, the old brewing and all. But what comes out of my kitchen is what comes out of yours. Something sweet and cold for the porch on a hot day.

So pour yourself a glass. We've earned it. Let's finish this book together.



Ginger Beer

STRAIGHT FROM MARY RANDOLPH'S BOOK, 1824

Pour two gallons of boiling water on two pounds brown sugar, one and a half ounce of cream of tartar, and the same of pounded ginger; stir them well, and put it in a small cask; when milk warm, put in half a pint of good yeast, shake the cask well, and stop it close—in twenty-four hours it will be fit to bottle—cork it very well, and in ten days it will sparkle like Champagne—one or two lemons cut in slices and put in, will improve it much... This is a wholesome and delicious beverage in warm weather.

— Mary Randolph, *The Virginia House-wife*, 1824

Now, what is she even saying?

This is homemade ginger soda, and doesn't she make it sound wonderful? "Sparkle like Champagne."

Her method is a light fermentation. Ginger, sugar, and cream of tartar in water, a bit of yeast to make it fizz, then bottled tight for ten days until it turns bubbly.

We're going to skip the cask-and-yeast business and make a quick, bright ginger drink the grandkids can gulp on the spot. Same flavor, no waiting, no fuss.

Maggie's version

makes about 6 glasses

-  1 cup fresh ginger, peeled and grated
-  $\frac{3}{4}$ cup sugar
-  4 cups water
-  Juice of 2 lemons

✿ Chilled sparkling water to finish

Simmer the grated ginger with the sugar and water for about 20 minutes to make a strong, spicy syrup. Let it cool, then strain out the ginger.

Stir in the lemon juice. This ginger syrup keeps in the fridge for a couple of weeks.

To serve, pour a generous splash of syrup into a glass, top with cold sparkling water and ice, and give it a stir. It bites and it sparkles, exactly like Mary promised.

While the oven does its work

Mary's line about it being "wholesome" wasn't just her opinion. It was medicine and refreshment in one.

Ginger settles a sour stomach, and a cool fizzy drink on a brutal Virginia August afternoon was pure relief. She'd have made it by the caskful for the whole household.

And here's the thing to notice. Every bottle of ginger ale on the store shelf is chasing this exact drink. They just took the ginger down and the sugar up.

Make Mary's, taste the real ginger bite, and you'll wonder why we ever settled for less.



Spruce Beer

STRAIGHT FROM AMELIA'S BOOK, 1796

Take four ounces of hops, let them boil half an hour in one gallon of water, strain the hop water then add sixteen gallons of warm water, two gallons of molasses, eight ounces of essence of spruce, dissolved in one quart of water, put it in a clean cask, then shake it well together, add half a pint of emptins, then let it stand and work one week... when it is drawn off to bottle, add one spoonful of molasses to every bottle.

— Amelia Simmons, *American Cookery*, 1796

Now, what is she even saying?

This is the original American root beer, and it tastes of the northern forest.

"Essence of spruce" is a syrup made from boiling spruce tips, the soft new green growth on the ends of the branches. "Emptins" was Amelia's homemade yeast starter.

She brews molasses and spruce essence into a light, piney, faintly sweet beer. We'll make a quick non-alcoholic spruce soda that gives you the same woodsy taste.

Maggie's version

makes about 6 glasses

- ✱ 2 cups fresh spruce tips (the bright green new growth), or 1 tsp spruce essence
- ✱ ½ cup molasses
- ✱ 6 cups water
- ✱ Chilled sparkling water to finish

Simmer the spruce tips in the water for about 20 minutes until it smells like a pine forest. Strain it, then stir the molasses into the warm liquid until it dissolves.

Chill this dark, piney syrup. It keeps well in the fridge.

To serve, mix a few spoons of the syrup with cold sparkling water over ice. It's resinous and earthy and unlike any soda you've had. Start with a little spruce, sweetheart, it's strong.

While the oven does its work

Here's the part that will surprise you. Spruce beer wasn't just a treat. It kept sailors alive.

Spruce tips are loaded with vitamin C, and on long voyages this beer helped prevent scurvy when there wasn't a fresh vegetable for a thousand miles. Captain Cook swore by it.

So this piney drink is a medicine chest disguised as a soda. Amelia's neighbors brewed it every spring when the new spruce growth came in tender and green.

Walk past an evergreen this spring and pinch off a bright new tip. That's a colonial pharmacy, growing right there in the yard.



Molasses Small Beer

STRAIGHT FROM MARY RANDOLPH'S BOOK, 1824

Put five quarts of hops, and five of wheat bran, into fifteen gallons of water; boil it three or four hours, strain it, and pour it into a cask with one head taken out; put in five quarts of molasses, stir it till well mixed, throw a cloth over the barrel; when moderately warm, add a quart of good yeast, which must be stirred in; then stop it close with a cloth and board. When it has fermented and become quite clear, bottle it.

— Mary Randolph, *The Virginia House-wife*, 1824

Now, what is she even saying?

This is it, the "small beer" that gives the chapter its name. The plain, daily, mild drink of the whole household.

Hops, wheat bran, and molasses, boiled and lightly fermented into a soft brown table drink. Barely any strength to it. This was what sat on the supper table beside the water pitcher.

Mine is a quick molasses cream soda, all the cozy flavor with none of the brewing.

Maggie's version

makes about 6 glasses

- ✱ ½ cup molasses
- ✱ 4 cups water
- ✱ 1 tsp vanilla
- ✱ Pinch of ground ginger

✿ Chilled sparkling water to finish

Warm the molasses with the water until it dissolves into a smooth dark syrup. Stir in the vanilla and a whisper of ginger, then let it cool.

Chill the syrup. To serve, mix it with cold sparkling water over plenty of ice.

It comes out dark, malty, and gently sweet, a little like an old-fashioned cream soda or a mild root beer. This is the everyday taste of a colonial supper table.

While the oven does its work

I want you to picture the whole family at the table, cups in hand, all drinking the same thing. That was small beer.

Water from the well or the creek could carry sickness nobody understood yet. But the brewing and the molasses made small beer safe, so everyone drank it, from the grandfather down to the toddler.

It sounds strange to us, children with their "beer." But it was closer to a mild malty soda than to anything that would tipsy a soul.

A whole civilization ran on this humble brown drink. Now you can pour a glass of it, and taste the ordinary Tuesday of 1824.



Hydromel, or Mead

STRAIGHT FROM MARY RANDOLPH'S BOOK, 1824

Mix your mead in the proportion of thirty-six ounces of honey to four quarts of warm water; when the honey is completely held in solution, pour it into a cask. When fermented, and become perfectly clear, bottle and cork it well. If properly prepared, it is a pleasant and wholesome drink; and in summer particularly grateful, on account of the large quantity of carbonic acid gas which it contains.

— Mary Randolph, *The Virginia House-wife*, 1824

Now, what is she even saying?

Mead is the oldest drink there is, sweetheart. Older than wine, older than beer. Honey and water, and time.

"Hydromel" is just the fancy Greek name for it, meaning water-honey. Mary dissolves honey in warm water and lets it ferment naturally into something light and sparkling.

Her "carbonic acid gas" is simply the fizz. We'll make a fresh honey drink that keeps that ancient honey-and-water soul without the wait.

Maggie's version

makes about 6 glasses

- ✱ ½ cup good honey
- ✱ 4 cups warm water
- ✱ Juice of 1 lemon
- ✱ Chilled sparkling water to finish

Stir the honey into the warm water until it fully dissolves, then let it cool. Stir in the lemon juice for brightness.

Chill this honey water well. To serve, pour it over ice and top with a splash of cold sparkling water for the gentle fizz mead is loved for.

It's delicate, floral, and barely sweet. This is the taste that Vikings and pharaohs and colonial farmwives all shared, poured fresh for your own grandchildren.

While the oven does its work

Think about what you're holding here. Mead is very likely the first fermented drink humans ever made, thousands of years before recorded history.

A honeycomb got rained on, the wild yeast did its work, somebody brave took a sip, and here we still are. That word "honeymoon" is even said to come from the old custom of newlyweds drinking mead for a month.

Mary Randolph put this ancient thing in her Virginia cookbook as casually as a batch of biscuits. To her it was just another useful drink.

That's the wonder of these old books. The whole long history of the world, tucked between a soup and a cake.



Raspberry Shrub

STRAIGHT FROM MARY RANDOLPH'S BOOK, 1824

Put a quart of ripe red raspberries in a bowl; pour on them a quart of strong well flavoured vinegar—let them stand twenty-four hours, strain them through a bag, put this liquid on another quart, of fresh raspberries, which strain in the same manner—and then on a third quart: when this last is prepared, make it very sweet with pounded loaf sugar; refine and bottle it. It is a delicious beverage mixed with iced water.

— Mary Randolph, *The Virginia House-wife*, 1824

Now, what is she even saying?

Don't wrinkle your nose at "vinegar." A shrub is one of the most refreshing drinks you will ever taste, I promise.

The idea is genius. You steep raspberries in vinegar, which pulls out and preserves every bit of their flavor, then sweeten it into a syrup. The vinegar's tang is exactly what makes it so thirst-quenching.

Mary passes the vinegar through three separate batches of berries to make it deeply, intensely fruity. Then a splash in iced water, and it's magic.

Maggie's version

makes about 2 cups syrup

- ✱ 3 cups raspberries
- ✱ 1 cup vinegar (white wine or apple cider)
- ✱ 1 to 1½ cups sugar

Put the raspberries in a bowl and pour the vinegar over them. Cover and let them steep on the counter a full day, so the vinegar drinks up all that berry flavor.

Strain out the berries, pressing gently. Stir the sugar into the pink liquid until it dissolves, then bottle it.

Keep it in the fridge. To serve, pour a couple of spoons into a glass of cold water over ice. Sweet, tart, and stunningly pink, the grandkids ask for it by the pitcher.

While the oven does its work

Shrubs are having a comeback, and the fancy cocktail bars think they invented them. They did not.

This is a preservation trick, plain and simple. Before refrigeration, vinegar was how you caught the flavor of ripe summer fruit and made it last into winter. The drink was the happy accident.

Every trendy "drinking vinegar" on a menu today is Mary Randolph's raspberry shrub in a costume. She was two hundred years ahead of the hipsters.

So make it, serve it cold and pink, and if anyone calls it trendy, you set them straight.



Cherry Shrub

STRAIGHT FROM MARY RANDOLPH'S BOOK, 1824

Gather ripe morello cherries, pick them from the stalk, and put them in an earthen pot, which must be set into an iron pot of water; make the water boil, but take care that none of it gets into the cherries; when the juice is extracted, pour it into a bag... sweeten it to your taste, and when it becomes perfectly clear, bottle it... It will keep all summer, in a dry cool place, and is delicious mixed with water.

— Mary Randolph, *The Virginia House-wife*, 1824

Now, what is she even saying?

Here's a gentler shrub, made with no vinegar at all, just pure cherry.

Mary's method is a clever one. She sets a pot of cherries inside a pot of boiling water, so the gentle heat draws the juice out slowly without scorching it. That's a double boiler, and she's using it to make the cleanest, brightest cherry syrup you can imagine.

Sweeten, bottle, and it keeps all summer. "Delicious mixed with water," and she's not wrong.

Maggie's version

makes about 2 cups syrup

- ✱ 4 cups ripe cherries, pitted (sour morellos if you can get them)
- ✱ $\frac{3}{4}$ cup sugar
- ✱ Squeeze of lemon

Put the cherries and sugar in a saucepan over low heat. Let them slowly release their juice and collapse, about 20 minutes, mashing gently as they soften.

Strain the juice through a fine sieve or cloth, pressing to get it all. Stir in a squeeze of lemon and bottle the deep red syrup.

Keep it cold. To serve, a few spoons in a glass of iced water, still or sparkling. It's the pure, sun-warmed taste of a cherry tree in July.

While the oven does its work

That double-boiler trick tells you something about how careful these cooks were.

She could have just boiled the cherries in water. But she knew that would water down and dull the flavor. So she coaxed the juice out with gentle steam-heat instead, keeping it pure and strong.

That's not a simple cook following orders. That's a woman who understood exactly what she was doing and why.

Every recipe in this book is like that, if you look close. Little acts of quiet genius, passed hand to hand, grandmother to granddaughter, all the way down to you and me.



Iced Lemonade

STRAIGHT FROM MARY RANDOLPH'S BOOK, 1824

Make a quart of rich lemonade, whip the whites of six fresh eggs to a strong froth — mix them well with the lemonade, and freeze it. The juice of morello cherries, or of currants mixed with water and sugar, and prepared in the same way, make very delicate ices.

— Mary Randolph, *The Virginia House-wife*, 1824

Now, what is she even saying?

This isn't a glass of lemonade, sweetheart. This is a frozen lemonade ice, a colonial sorbet, and it's a marvel.

She makes strong lemonade, folds in whipped egg whites to make it light and airy, then freezes the whole thing. The egg whites are what keep it soft and fluffy instead of a hard block.

The result is somewhere between a sorbet and a frozen lemon cloud. On a hot day, it's heaven.

Maggie's version

serves 4 to 6

- * 1 cup fresh lemon juice
- * ¾ cup sugar
- * 2 cups water
- * 2 pasteurized egg whites (or 3 tbsp aquafaba, the liquid from a can of chickpeas)

Stir the lemon juice, sugar, and water together until the sugar dissolves. Taste it, it should be bright and a touch too sweet, because freezing dulls sweetness.

Whip the egg whites (or aquafaba) to soft peaks and gently fold them into the lemonade. Pour it into a shallow dish and freeze.

Every 30 minutes or so, scrape and stir it with a fork so it stays fluffy. In a few hours you have a soft, tart, cloud-light lemon ice. Ruby calls it snow.

While the oven does its work

Now stop and think about how hard this was to make in 1824.

There were no freezers. To serve something frozen, you needed ice cut from a winter pond and packed in straw in an icehouse, saved for months against the summer heat. Ice was a luxury only the well-off could manage.

So a frozen lemonade ice wasn't everyday. It was a showstopper, the kind of thing that made guests gasp at a fine Virginia party.

We open a freezer door without a thought. Mary planned for this dish half a year ahead. Serve it, and toast the winter ice that made it possible.



Orgeat

STRAIGHT FROM MARY RANDOLPH'S BOOK, 1824

Boil two quarts of milk with a stick of cinnamon and let it stand to be quite cold, first taking out the cinnamon; blanch four ounces of the best sweet almonds, pound them in a marble mortar with a little rose-water; mix them well with the milk, sweeten it to your taste, and let it boil a few minutes only, lest the almonds should be oily; strain it through a very fine sieve till quite smooth, and free from the almonds, serve it up either cold or lukewarm, in glasses with handles.

— Mary Randolph, *The Virginia House-wife*, 1824

Now, what is she even saying?

Mary gave this one a subtitle I adore. "A Necessary Refreshment at all Parties." She wasn't messing around.

Orgeat is a creamy almond drink, scented with cinnamon and rose water. You steep almonds and cinnamon into milk, sweeten it, and strain it silky-smooth.

It's the great-grandmother of the almond syrup baristas swirl into your coffee today, and of the orgeat in a fancy tiki cocktail. Hers is the original, gentle and party-ready.

Maggie's version

makes about 4 glasses

- ✱ 3 cups milk (or almond milk, to double down)
- ✱ 1 cinnamon stick
- ✱ ½ cup finely ground almonds
- ✱ ½ tsp rose water

✿ Sugar or honey to taste

Warm the milk with the cinnamon stick, then take it off the heat and let it steep as it cools. Fish out the cinnamon.

Stir in the ground almonds and the rose water, warm it just a minute more, and sweeten to taste. Then strain it through a fine sieve or cloth until it's perfectly smooth.

Serve it cold or barely warm, in your prettiest glasses, exactly as Mary said. It's soft, nutty, and faintly floral, a genuinely elegant thing to hand a guest.

While the oven does its work

That little splash of rose water is the star, and it's a window into a whole vanished taste.

Colonial and early American cooks used rose water the way we reach for vanilla today. It was in their cakes, their custards, their drinks. A whole generation's idea of "fancy" tasted faintly of roses.

We lost that somewhere along the way, and I think it's a shame. Rose water is still on the shelf at any good grocer, waiting.

Make Mary's orgeat, and you'll taste exactly what "elegant" meant at a party two hundred years ago. It's due for a comeback.



Currant Cordial

STRAIGHT FROM MARY RANDOLPH'S BOOK, 1824

Gather full ripe currants on a dry day, pick them from the stalks, and weigh them; then crush them with your hands, leaving none whole; for every two pounds of currants put one quart of water; stir all well together, and let it stand three hours, and strain the liquor through a sieve; then, for every three pounds of currants, put one pound of powdered loaf sugar... This is a pleasant and cheap wine—and if properly made, will keep good for many years.

— Mary Randolph, *The Virginia House-wife*, 1824

Now, what is she even saying?

Mary titled this "currant wine," because in her day, a family with a currant bush turned it into a mild homemade country wine for the cellar.

But the beautiful heart of the recipe is what happens first. You crush ripe currants, steep them in water, strain the liquor, and sweeten it into a gorgeous ruby cordial.

That's where we're going to stop, right at the cordial stage, and make a bright non-alcoholic currant drink for the whole family. Same jewel color, same summer-fruit flavor.

Maggie's version

makes about 3 cups syrup

- * 4 cups fresh currants (red currants are prettiest)
- * 2 cups water
- * 1½ cups sugar
- * Squeeze of lemon

Crush the currants well with your hands or a masher, then stir them into the water. Let them sit three hours, just as Mary says, so the water pulls out all that tart red juice.

Strain the liquid through a sieve, pressing the fruit. Stir in the sugar and a squeeze of lemon until it dissolves, then bring it to a brief simmer and bottle it.

Keep the cordial cold. To serve, a few spoons in a glass of iced still or sparkling water. It's tart, ruby-bright, and pure summer.

While the oven does its work

And here we are at the end of our book, so let me leave you with the thought that started it.

Every one of these recipes was somebody's ordinary. A currant bush by the kitchen door, a pot on the back of the stove, a grandmother showing a child how it's done. Nothing fancy. Just the daily work of feeding the people you love.

That's all I've ever done in these pages. I found the real words of Amelia and Mary, two women who wrote it all down so it wouldn't be lost, and I sat with them at their tables and brought their cooking home to ours.

Now it's yours. Crush the currants, brew the ginger, roast the turkey, and tell your grandchildren where it all came from. That's how a recipe lives forever. It gets made again.

Thank you for cooking with me. Now go call the kids to the table.

Love, Maggie

A Little Glossary

Here, all in one place, are the old words you met along the way. Keep this page handy the first few times you cook from the originals.

Catsup (ketchup). Any dark, salty, bottled sauce. For most of history it had nothing to do with tomatoes.

Cimlin. A small pattypan squash.

Codle (coddle). To cook gently in water kept just below a boil.

Dough spur. A little wheel for cutting and crimping pastry. A fork does the job.

Emptins. Homemade yeast, usually brewed from hops.

Flich. A side of bacon or salt pork.

Forcemeat. A seasoned stuffing of bread, fat, and herbs, pressed into meat or rolled into balls.

Gill. A quarter of a cup.

Hock. The lower joint of a ham or leg, full of flavor for the soup pot.

Hydromel. Mead. Honey and water, fermented. The oldest drink there is.

Indian meal. Cornmeal. "Indian corn" was the native maize.

Loaf sugar. Refined sugar sold in a hard cone, chipped and pounded as needed.

Marrow. The soft fat inside a bone, prized for richness. Butter stands in.

Morello. A tart cherry, the best kind for shrubs and preserving.

Ochra. Okra. Brought to America from West Africa.

Pearl ash (pearlash). An early chemical leavener, ancestor of baking soda and powder.

Pompkin. Pumpkin.

Race ginger. Whole, fresh ginger root, before it's ground.

Rose water. A floral flavoring used the way we use vanilla today.

Rusk. A twice-baked bread, crisp and keeping, like a hard biscuit.

Sallad. Salad.

Saltpetre. A curing salt that keeps meat red and preserved.

Sounds. The air-bladders of a fish, cooked as a delicacy.

Slapjack. A griddle cake, cousin to the pancake.

Small beer. A very mild, lightly brewed everyday drink for the whole household.

Suet. Firm beef fat, used in puddings and pastry. Butter stands in.

Syllabub. A frothy drink or dessert of cream and something tart.

Tripe. The stomach lining of beef, cooked slow and tender.

Where These Recipes Came From

I want you to be able to hold the very same books I held. That is half the joy of this.

Both are in the public domain, free and complete, and you can read them online this minute.

The two sources for this book

Amelia Simmons, *American Cookery*, 1796. The first cookbook written by an American. The first edition is preserved by Project Gutenberg (ebook #12815).

Mary Randolph, *The Virginia House-wife*, 1824. The great early cookbook of the American South. Preserved by Project Gutenberg (ebook #12519).

Every historical recipe in this book was copied by hand from the actual text of these two books, word for word, spelling untouched.

If you want to go deeper

Project Gutenberg (gutenberg.org) has both books free to read.

The Michigan State University "Feeding America" project keeps beautiful scholarly transcriptions of dozens of early American cookbooks, with photographs of the original pages.

If a rainy afternoon ever finds you curious, that is where a person can happily disappear for hours. Ask me how I know.

About Maggie

I'm Maggie Hartwell. I live in an old farmhouse in Connecticut with more cookbooks than sense and a cast-iron skillet older than my marriage.

I spent my working years as a schoolteacher, which is really just cooking for the mind. Now I keep house, spoil three grandchildren, and dig through old recipes for a living, more or less.

My grandmother, Nana Pearl, put a wooden spoon in my hand before I could read. Everything warm I know came from her kitchen.

This is the first of what I hope will be a little series. Next, God willing, I want to take you into the ration kitchens of the Second World War, where women fed their families on almost nothing and did it with style.

Nana Pearl cooked through those years. So that one, I'll be telling partly as hers.

Until then, thank you for cooking with me. Pull up a chair anytime.

With love from my kitchen to yours,

Maggie

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