The Library of Virginia Cookbook Collection

by Tom Ray

To be a connoisseur of fine or regional food is a very good thing. To be a connoisseur of “cookbooks no one has ever heard of” is quite another. I’m taking that description from a chapter heading in popular novelist Pat Conroy’s own cookbook. Mr. Conroy goes on to say:

“My beginnings (cook book collecting) were modest. After Escoffier [the legendary French chef and culinary writer], I started by gathering small collections of Junior League and church cookbooks from around the South. They pleased me greatly because they were such accurate reflections of their cities and towns, as authentic as fingerprints. For me, they were also compendiums of acquired wisdom and experience that offered shortcuts that I could not learn in a lifetime... These secrets of the trade are what I love best about those modest books that spring from the collective unconscious of churches, schools, clubs, and homes. They are bound economically and most of them are clasped together with plastic ringlets that give them the look and feel of an amateur’s obsession.”

Thank you, Mr. Conroy. Therein lies the rub, so to speak. Obsession. For the past ten or twelve years I’ve had something of an obsession collecting Virginia cookbooks, exactly like those described above, plastic ringlets and all, for the Library of Virginia. I haunt thrift stores, estate sales, used bookshops, and public library book sales. I’ve even found cookbooks in one of the tourist centers along I-64. I’ve coerced librarian colleagues in Fairfax and Hampton to become enablers in this obsession by culling cookbooks from their own gift book sales. When in the D.C. area or out of state, I look for Virginia cookbooks and quite often find them. Virginia, after all, was the source for the very first cookbook printed in the American colonies. Although I have yet to come across the very rare edition of William Parks’ The Compleat Housewife printed in 1742 in Williamsburg, this reprint of an earlier London publication has informed every Virginia cookbook since the 18th century.

Tom Ray first came to the Library of Virginia 20 years ago as the chief cataloger for the Virginia Newspaper Project. He held two other cataloging positions before becoming the Collection Management Coordinator. He developed a cataloging workshop for public librarians across the state and has helped libraries evaluate their local collections for digitization projects. Tom is the co-author of Greetings from Richmond (2009), an architectural history of the city as seen through vintage postcard views. Email Tom at: tom.ray@lva.virginia.gov.
My obsession with collecting cookbooks for the Library of Virginia began after a very savvy book dealer offered me a collection of Virginia cookbooks of “genealogical significance and import.” The fellow is a very good salesman and made a convincing argument, but his prices were more than I wanted to pay. He did, however, inspire me to begin looking for cookbooks in the aforementioned thrift stores and estate sales, where I usually pay from fifty cents to a couple of dollars for a book. Once in a while I am tempted to pay retail for a particularly good regional cookbook or a very unusual collective work. But usually I spend no more than $5. I seldom spend Library funds for cookbooks, but there are exceptions. For example, a few months ago a rare book dealer “offered” the Library a copy of the 1921 Hampton Institute cookbook, *A Book of Recipes for the Cooking School*, by Carrie Alberta Lyford, for about $275. However, after a bit of research I discovered that very edition still available at the Hampton Museum for $40. I’m sure the dealer’s copy has character, but the Library was able to acquire a pristine example for a very reasonable price. Considering fewer than 25 OCLC libraries hold the book, it can be considered scarce (though perhaps not rare).

My friend in the Hampton area facilitated another similar purchase this past year. I was able to acquire, for a very modest sum, the oldest example of a church cookbook in the Library collection. Published in 1898, *Key to the Pantry: Choice, Tried Recipes* was produced by the Ladies of the Church of the Epiphany in Danville. The book has a fine buckram illustrated binding and, along with the attributed recipes, wonderful business advertisements. As with most pre-20th century cookbooks the recipes in this one are presented in paragraph format and include directions for the intuitive cook like “bake in a hot oven.” I’m afraid this one is beyond my cooking competence, but it is a treasure for the collection.

I particularly value church cookbooks because they are often the sole source of information about a particular church and congregation, many times with photographs and almost always the names of those contributing the recipes. They are true local history and, as my dealer friend insisted, genealogical resources. Will someone come in one day looking for Great Aunt Swannie’s sour cream cake recipe? Someday it’s bound to happen, though I am happy to simply preserve the church history.

As I was working on this article I found my favorite church cookbook title to date. From the Shady

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**Two food groups AND duct tape? What’s not to love?**
title with one estate sale manager, trading a personal copy for other printed ephemera for the Library collections. The dealer was thrilled to be able to supply a friend with the “cougar.” A colleague assures me the recipes in the book “kick ass.” Let’s hope.

Let me return to the genealogical theme one last time with two examples of family cookbooks. The newest addition to the collection is the Uzel Family Cookbook: 100 Years in America—Czech Recipes and Other Favorites (2011). The book was produced for a family reunion. The very handsome book documents the family of Charles and Frank Uzel who came to Dinwiddie County in 1911 from a small village in what is now Romania. Combining Virginia history with old world treats—what can be better?

Sometimes local cookbooks can be a challenge to catalog if there is no source of publication or date. One such example is the Carter Cousins Cookbook (n.d.). We attribute this book to the Roanoke area based on a copy of a recipe reprinted from the Roanoke Times & World News bound-in as the last page. We can only hope the contributors really are Virginia Carter cousins. Frequently we have to rely on scant information to attribute privately produced cookbooks as being from Virginia. I often check the back pages of such books for local order forms, especially if produced by a cookbook factory such as Fundcraft Publishing.

The final type of cookbook I’ll discuss are the ones by local or legendary chefs. One of the most influential Southern chefs, Edna Lewis, was a Virginia native, although she spent much of her professional cooking life outside the state. She actually lived in Chapel Hill, N.C. at the same time I did back in the early 1980s. Although I never met her, I once had the most

Grove United Methodist Church in Short Pump (the far West End of Richmond) comes: Cheese Curls, Hot Dogs and Duct Tape (2006). Two food groups AND duct tape? What’s not to love? Of special note in this collection under the heading “Uses for duct tape, part two”:

Overall Wisdom:
— If it moves and it’s not supposed to move, use duct tape.
— If it is supposed to move but doesn’t, use WD-40.

As I mentioned earlier, I will occasionally buy a new cookbook if the production is unique or simply well done. The most recent example of that was Culinary Tales: a Collection of Recipes From the Bay, Rivah and Beyond (2011) produced by the Cookbook Committee of the Middlesex Public Library. The artwork, design, recipes and stories make this compilation a regional delight. I splurged, paying $22 for the book, but what a treat!

We estimate that the Library currently has a collection of 2,500 cookbooks, primarily by Virginians or Virginia organizations. The collection documents the people, food ways, and culture from the 18th century and into the 21st. I once tried to make a list of the types of clubs and organizations that have produced cookbooks, other than churches and schools, but I quickly gave up. Firemen, nurses, PTAs, Mennonites, families, stately homes, the Virginia Egg Board, even a gastric by-pass surgery survivor group … the list is seemingly endless.

This might be a fun moment to stop and describe one of the most often stolen books in the Library collection: The Stuffed Cougar, by The Patron’s Association of The Collegiate Schools in Richmond. The 1973 imprint pre-dates the current euphemistic use of the term cougar. However, the book has been in such demand that a number of copies have gone missing. I keep a copy in a secret reserve area in case yet another disappears. I’ve even bartered this

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memorable dessert made from brandied peaches that Miss Lewis had made for a friend. Occasions when one has a really remarkable meal or dish are rare in my limited culinary experience, but I will always remember those peaches! And while I regret never having met Miss Lewis, copies of her books are in the Virginia Authors Room here at the Library.

Three successful Virginia chefs and cookbook authors that I have had the privilege of meeting are Paul Elbling, Mary Angela Morgan, and Patrick Evans-Hylton. Chef Paul’s book, Chef Paul’s La Petite France (1975), titled after his former restaurant, is a Richmond collector’s item, when it can be found. And Chef Paul’s sauces are legendary in Richmond restaurant circles. On the Italian side of the spectrum is Mary Angela Morgan’s self-titled book, Mary Angela’s Best of Everything (2004). Mrs. Morgan’s book is one of the best single author books in this region of the country with great photos and a recipe per page. The most recent book by a well known chef is Dishing Up Virginia (2013), by Hampton Roads chef Patrick Evans-Hylton. Mr. Evans-Hylton’s encyclopedic knowledge of the food and folkways of Virginia and the South are brought to bear in this remarkable collection. This is a book for the historian as well as the cook.

This is just a sampling of the many cookbooks in the Library of Virginia collection. For those who would like to view the extensive Bibliography of Virginia-Related Cookbooks, visit the Virginia Tech website at: http://spec.lib.vt.edu/culinary/va_cookbooks_bib.html. For those interested in conducting research on Virginia cookbooks, I highly recommend Colonial Virginia’s Cooking Dynasty (2004), written by former Library of Virginia staff member Katherine E. Harbury. Her scholarly analysis of 18th century manuscripts, lifestyles, and cooking is a unique achievement.

The Library of Virginia collection of cookbooks can be found in the Library’s public catalog by title, author, organization name, and subject if the book is devoted to a specific food or type of food. There are many circulating copies. Enjoy!

I am grateful to my colleague, Deanna Chavez, for finding the perfect quote to end this little article. Deanna recently found the following reviewer quote on an Amazon review of a cookbook: “This is a fun cookbook with attention grabbing antidotes and easy to follow recipes.” Antidotes and recipes? I like it.