



THE RECIPE KEEPER

In eastern North Carolina, one woman has made it her life's work to rescue the region's rich food traditions from obscurity — including some of her own family's recipes.

written by KIM GRIZZARD / photography by CHRIS ROGERS

DECADES HAVE PASSED SINCE Tammy Kelly was a little girl growing up on a tobacco farm in Carteret County, but the memories haven't faded. After a long week of work, her family would sit down to supper and enjoy a home-cooked meal featuring Down East baked flounder, Ma Pat's coleslaw, and, if they were lucky, Grandma Clara's strawberry pound cake. "We had a meal every night," Kelly says. "It may have been 8 o'clock during the tobacco season, but Grandma left her farm work early to go cook lunch for everybody, and then Mom cooked at night. That's my knowledge of way-back-when foods."

In her 35 years with North Carolina Cooperative Extension, Kelly has seen some of eastern North Carolina's culinary heritage crumble like the old packhouse that now barely stands on her family's farm. As Extension director for Lenoir County, part of her work is keeping the area's food traditions standing strong. "We help preserve that heritage of recipes," Kelly says. "I think it's important."

Preserving culinary heritage may sound like something that applies mainly to first-generation immigrants who want to ensure that the flavors of their distinctive cultures are not diluted once they blend into America's melting pot. But for some young adults in the South, making traditional foods like biscuits, fried okra, or Brunswick stew at home is a foreign concept. As a result, Kelly's role in food preservation education goes beyond sharing safe home-canning practices — it involves reintroducing forgotten foods and food-preparation



Dr. Tammy Kelly, Extension director for Lenoir County, always loved her grandma's Down East strawberry pound cake. It's among the many handwritten heritage recipes (opposite) that Kelly's collected for posterity.



“If we don’t go ahead and save [heritage recipes], they’re not going to get saved.”

methods, sometimes for seemingly simple fare like boiled peanuts (salt, soak, simmer in shell).

Someone from Raleigh once asked Kelly for a recipe for a tomato sandwich. “I said, ‘It’s nothing but bread, mayonnaise, tomatoes, and a little salt and pepper, but I can write it down,’” she recalls, laughing. “You want to use good, old-fashioned white bread.”

THERE WAS A TIME WHEN DIRECTIONS FOR dishes that weren’t simply common knowledge were typically available in church or community cookbooks. Kelly keeps collections of both at home and in her Kinston office, which is decorated in red for North Carolina State University. That’s where she received her undergraduate and graduate degrees in

horticulture science and agricultural and extension education, as well as her doctoral degree in education. Those cookbooks, often sold at fundraisers, helped preserve traditional recipes for favorites like cornbread, squash casserole, and cherry pie salad. “They always have somebody’s name on them so you know whose recipe it is,” Kelly says. “You can say, ‘I remember so-and-so’s recipe,’ and then find it by the person.” Members of Lenoir County Extension Homemakers, now known as the Extension and Community Association, used to put together cookbooks themselves every so often. But community cookbooks and the recipes that they preserved have become rare delicacies as more people have come to rely on the Internet for direction in the kitchen.

Kelly has kept heritage recipes circulating through a weekly cooking column that was published for years in *The Free Press* in Kinston and now appears online. Most of her articles are based on what’s in season at the local farmers market, and she often incorporates old family recipes.

Not every tradition is worth saving, Kelly says. To be honest, she confesses,

Kelly rarely recommends brand names when cooking, but for Grandma Clara’s strawberry pound cake, she insists on using a Bundt pan: “Since this one has to be exact,” she says, “I honored my grandmother.”

Grandma Clara’s Fresh Strawberry Pound Cake

FOR THE GLAZE:

- ¼ stick melted margarine
- ¼ cup fresh strawberries, chopped
- 1½ cups powdered sugar

FOR THE CAKE:

- 1 box Duncan Hines white cake mix
- 2 tablespoons flour
- ½ teaspoon baking powder
- 1 (3-ounce) box strawberry Jell-O, dry
- ¾ cup Wesson oil
- 4 eggs
- ½ cup water
- ¾ cup fresh strawberries, chopped

For the glaze: Combine ingredients.

For the cake: Preheat oven to 325°. Lightly oil and flour a Bundt pan. Mix ingredients in a blender for 3 minutes until smooth. Pour batter into prepared pan and bake for 65 minutes. Let cake cool in pan for 12 to 13 minutes. Turn out of pan and cool for another 10 minutes before glazing cake while warm.



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her grandmother tended to overcook brussels sprouts, and Kelly would never advise readers to adopt the old practice of putting all leftovers from Sunday lunch into a cool oven and leaving them there until dinnertime. But she doesn't disparage old-school Southern cooking techniques, including those that relied on lard and deep-frying, even for vegetables. She steers clear of correcting her elders' culinary methods and is mindful that members of farming families generally performed enough physical labor to balance out their calorie intake. "No food is bad," Kelly says. "You can't say, 'You're never having that country ham again.' I think we turn people off when we say, 'You *can't* have this; you *can't* have that. You can't ever have *this* again.'"

Time is taking care of some of that, as heritage recipes have begun to disappear from the landscape. Kelly sometimes fields calls from people with questions about family recipes that they remember from years ago, but have no relatives left to consult for answers. Some recipes were never written down at all, and, of the ones that remain, the lettering on handwritten cards has become washed out over time. As recipes fade, more is lost than just food. It's also a family's heritage. "It's the tradition of us going in the house to eat lunch at Grandma's — Sunday lunch every Sunday," Kelly says. "Cooking was who she was. The new generations maybe don't do that as much, so we probably are losing some traditions."

To keep that from happening, Kelly has become more intentional about preserving old recipes not only for her readers but also for herself. Years ago, during her family's Thanksgiving dinners, she took notes and asked questions about her mother's homemade turkey dressing, hoping to replicate it herself one day. Now, she teaches others to do the same with their own family recipes. "I think if we don't go ahead and save them, they're not going to get saved," Kelly says. "The only way to do it is to remember that you loved it and to learn how to make it. You need to take care of it before it's gone." **Og**

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