

An Open Hearth Dinner

by Lynne Belluscio

This past Sunday, ten people showed up at my house to cook an open hearth meal. A few of them had been to an open hearth dinner before and knew what to expect, but for a few of them, it was a new experience.

The fire was already roaring in the fireplace and the pork loin was on the spit but the sausage needed to be stuffed, the butter churned and the bread mixed and kneaded. The menu also included a marinated winter salad of cauliflower, broccoli, mushrooms, cucumbers on shredded savoy cabbage. Sally Lunn, and a dessert of orange and raisin cake, and one, two, three, four cake topped with whipped cream and served with boiled coffee.

This is not fast food. It took about four hours and everyone's help to get all the food on the table. And although everything was made "from scratch" that's not quite true, since no one milked the cow for the milk and skimmed the cream. Much less butchered the pig and cleaned the hog casings for the sausage. But it does make you appreciate a time when putting food on the table took a lot of effort and hard work.

I sent a couple of the guys outside to split firewood for the brick oven. Luckily, I didn't have to send them back to haul water for washing dishes. Although I enjoy cooking over the open fire, I really appreciate having hot running water and a sink to clean up - - which seems never-ending after one of these meals. My daughter who agreed to help with the meal, spent a lot of time washing dishes and I still have two large kettles sitting on the hearth that need attention.

Most of the recipes are taken from 19th century cookbooks. Some, like the orange cake have been modernized, using baking soda instead of pearlsh. Come to think of it, we used seedless raisins, and I didn't have to bring out the raisin seeder. One of the oldest recipes - - actually in the 19th century they were called "receipts" was the "one, two, three, four cake." It's sometimes called "cup cake" because it could be baked in tin cups - -

early cupcakes. The ingredients are easy to remember: one cup of butter; two cups of sugar; three cups of flour and four eggs. And usually in the old cookbooks that's all that is printed. No directions. You have to know that you cream the sugar and butter until light. Then you add the eggs and beat well. The eggs are the only leavening so they need to be light and airy.

When Martha Stewart modernized the recipe, she separated the eggs and beat the yolks into the sugar and butter and then folded beaten egg whites into the mixture. Finally you add the three cups of flour and it's a good idea to sift the flour or use cake flour. The cake is baked in a "slow" oven. Since we baked the cake in the brick oven which doesn't have a thermometer, I baked the cake in an "eight oven". That means, when I stick my arm in the oven, I can count to eight before it's too hot and I have to pull my arm out.

I bake bread in an "eight" oven. A friend of mine bakes bread in a "twenty" oven but she counts faster. And if anyone asks how long the cake - - or bread should stay in the oven, the obvious answer is "until it's done." This cake is great with fresh fruit and whipped cream, but since fresh berries are not in season, I served the cake with raspberry jelly.

Back in 1976 when we tore out the west wall of our house and built the fireplace and brick oven, we decided to make Thanksgiving dinner over the fire. Everything was cooked in time, except the turkey, which took twice as long to cook as anticipated. That was the last time I roasted a turkey in the fireplace. Somehow I really think it's important to use a thermometer when roasting a turkey. I don't trust the little pop-up things.

Open hearth cooking can be a challenge. I often say to folks, that you can be a great cook, but if you aren't good at keeping a fire going, you can forget cooking in a fireplace. You have to know your firewood and be part pyromaniac. I've had fires so hot, they melted the solder on the tin reflector



oven, and I've used chestnut, that won't make your eyes water, but doesn't make good coals. One time, at a demonstration, I had to use charcoal briquettes for the dutch oven, and only had to use six on the cover to bake a pie.

The last thing to put over the fire was the coffee. Although I have a coffee bean roaster, it's almost impossible to buy green coffee beans, so our group ground fresh roasted coffee beans, which were mixed with raw eggs - - shell and all. You add enough eggs that when mixed with the coffee grounds, are mixed to a consistency of mortar. Then you add "enough" water and put the coffee over the fire. When it comes to a boil and "breaks three times" you take it off the fire and let it set for a couple of

minutes. The egg shells clarify the coffee and the eggs coagulate the grounds, so it's easier to pour the coffee into a mug.

I'm not a coffee drinker, but I hear that the boiled coffee is good. At least the night that it's made, however, the receipt for boiled coffee mentions that the coffee would be good for a couple of days. I've never tried it, but I suspect that might be an acquired taste.

As I get older, it takes me a couple of days to "recover" from one of these dinners. My back seems to give out. I should remember, that in the "good old days" ladies wore corsets that probably helped their backs. For me, a motrin works.

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