Cookbook obsession

When did my cookbook-reading obsession begin? Was it when I joined a 4-H club back in the 1950s and was prodded to enter pie-baking contests? Was it when paging through my mother’s red plaid Better Homes & Gardens? Was it when my dad, a part-time Raleigh salesman, gave me a colorful pictorial spiral-bound Raleigh cookbook in the fifth grade? I’m not sure. I just know I’ve always loved cookbooks.

I check them out at the library, scout rummage sales for early ethnic church editions, attend library sales, purchase online and find myself exploring bookstore cookbook sections more often than the bestseller shelves. Cookbooks are a favorite bedtime read.

When I decided to study cake decorating, I accumulated a small library on the craft plus a stack of books on how to bake the perfect cake. Becoming a grandmother launched me into baking memorable cookies. My English husband, hailing from Kentucky, urged me to recreate his mother’s banana pudding, thus spiraling my interest in southern cooking and soul food. Reading between the lines, soul-food cookbooks reiterate America’s shameful history of racial prejudice. Cookbooks can transport you to another time. I visualize barren gardens as I read 1930s Depression-era recipes. They make me realize how tough it was for my Dakota prairie ancestors.

My favorite collection began while searching online for a dill pickle recipe. Never satisfied with store-bought pickles, I decided to can my own heritage pickles. The Internet led me to North Dakota State University’s Germans from Russia Heritage Collection (GRHC). It was GRHC’s cookbooks that propagated my interest in genealogy and the study of my cultural history. Studying these cookbooks and consulting with other German Russian cooks has led me, and a few others, to respond to worldwide German Russian recipe and cooking method requests that are sent to the GRHC. I have cultivated many new friendships because of a shared interest in cookbooks.

Cookbooks that include short stories and pictures nurture cultural and historical understanding of ethnicities and their geographic locations. Since reading Minnesotan Ragnhavan Iyer’s cookbook, “The Turmeric Trail: Recipes and Memories from an Indian Childhood,” I have wanted to visit his Bombay, India, homeland. His descriptive stories and telling photos engage my palate without stepping into the kitchen.

You can read a cookbook and travel to faraway places and/or historical times without leaving your chair.

Gwen Schock Cowherd recommends these cooking-related books:

- The Joy of Pickling by Linda Ziedrich
- Food ‘N Customs: Recipes of the Black Sea Germans by Germans from Russia Heritage Society, Bismarck, North Dakota Volunteer Women Cookbook Committee
- The Taste of Country Cooking by Edna Lewis
- The African-American Heritage Cookbook by Carolyn Quick Tillery
- The Amish Cook by Elizabeth Coblenz

What’s on your bookshelf? Send us 450 words about your booklife, plus your list of five related books by women authors. editor@womenspress.com

Hooked on books? The Minnesota Women’s Press also publishes the magazine BookWomen—A Readers’ Community for Those Who Love Women’s Words. For a free sample copy, email books@womenspress.com.

One-year subscription (6 issues): $30

BookWomen
970 Raymond Ave., Suite 201, St. Paul, MN 55114
www.womenspress.com • 651-646-3968