

A GRACIOUS PLENTY
-Epilogue-

Author's Note: My late great aunt Mattie Maynard in Clarksdale, MS always politely said when offered a second helping at the meal table, "No thank you, I have had "gracious plenty." Her refined response is a fitting description of the South and the title of this cookbook.

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The three of them spoke to me, in their own way, using the language of food. Each of their messages was very different, but as I look back on my days as a little girl, the threads come together to create the fabric of my life. In recognize now, perhaps all women do, the importance of what the three of the taught me. *In the setting where food is grown, prepared and served, there is the sacred.* I learned, too, that in the mystery of the meal table there is a priceless truth: *I had a safe place where my family's values, beliefs and traditions were passed on.*

My maternal grandmother, Ellen Knighton Rainer, was the picture of a proud countrywoman: piercing brown eyes, white hair pinned up, simple floral-print dresses, and sensible laced-up shoes. She and my grandfather brought a boardinghouse during the Depression, so many relatives had a place to live from time to time. She learned to live off the land there in lower Alabama. I really don't remember her talking much. She would just take my hand and we would ease into the backyard to gather speckled eggs that she placed in her clean apron cupped under her arm. She always let me carry one in each hand so I could feel the warmth of their freshness. Sometimes we would pick figs from the garden trees just beyond the rusting fence. She taught me to make tomato sandwiches on white Sunbeam bread. We scraped yellow corn using the back of a knife, then would fry a panful in the skillet. We snapped fresh beans while sitting on the back porch or fed grain to the hens and their rooster, who had pretty free range of the yard. I remember particularly the Sunday I counted one less hen, yet I know not to ask questions of this importance, as it was a day of rest. I intuitively understood that Grandmama had forced her "life-and-death" connection to the fried-chicken platter. Even as a young child, I realized that the abundance from the backyard and our family times around the large table had a deeper meaning than I could fathom.

My paternal grandmother, Majorie Yerger Robinson, was more of a city woman, even though it was in a small Mississippi Delta town where she ruled the manor on Catalpa Street. Although stylishly turned out in high heels with silk hose, she always wore black or gray, as she was in eternal mourning because of the untimely death of her only daughter. She believed God had brought me here to take little Margie's place, so she had to make up for so much untaught motherly wisdom. She devoted herself to sharing her lessons of gentility with me during the frequent Saturday nights and Sundays that I spent with her.

Grandmother and I shared many hours together placing setting for twelve at the dining room table. I learned about the position of silver ware and a centerpiece, and napkin folding. No details were left unattended, right down to the crystal iced tea coasters and tiny cut-glass salt and pepper shakers. We two were simply doing women's work, as we talked our way around the table and prepared for Sunday meal, when my family and my cousins' family gathered for dinner after church.

By choice – her won or that which her society dictated – my grandmother did not undertake the actual food preparation; rather, her role, she explained was the art of ritual, table manners and conversation. (The kitchen belonged to that thried member of the triumvirate so influential in my understanding of the foodways of the South, Artie Parker. But she has yet to make her appearance.)

So in her self-appointed role as doyenne, on each Sunday, shortly after high noon, Grandmother rang the tiny silver bell to summons us to the table. In my assigned seat– always to her right–I sat with a crisp cloth napkin across my lap, hands folded and back straight to await the serving of the meal. Grandfather, at the opposite end of the table, was regal in his heavily starched shirt and maroon tie. Following the blessing, he carved the well-done roast then meticulously placed each serving of meat on a china plated from the stack in front of him. The ritual of passing began counterclockwise around the table. As the adults started to chat among themselves about the morning's sermon or the weather, the rhythm of forks being lifted and glasses raised shifted upward as we dug into the aspic salad on a Bibb lettuce bed, the first of many courses.

In keeping with the hallowed dictate that children should be seen and not hard, we were silent for the most part. Still, my brothers and cousins and I were caught up in the melody f the escalating conversations – politics, family matters, jokes, and particularly the sparring between my aunt and Daddy. Occasionally we'd share knowing, secretive glances across the table, creating a special kind of conspiracy of our own.

Then suddenly the kitchen door swung open. And Artie, majestic in her blue-and-white uniform, entered bearing the first of her many perfected dishes: silver bowls filled with sweet potato topped with browned marshmallows, an asparagus casserole, rice and gravy or mushy eggplant with cracker crumbs. Artie's beaten biscuits – the most humble yet most essential part of the meal – were always greeted with appreciative nods and smiles. Yet in a twinkling the finale would arrive with a swift clearing of dishes, and a stack of dessert plates were placed before Grandmother, who would then stand to serve angelic ambrosia from a frosted bowl. (Although the dessert offering varied from week to week, sometimes pecan pie with sherried whipped cream or chocolate or store-bought ice cream. It is the ambrosia that I choose to remember.)

In my memory of this weekly ritual in which my grandparents and Artie Parker each played their finely choreographed parts, nothing ever changed – the table, the conversation, the food. For this eager child, those wonderful Sunday afternoons told me that all was right with the world.

Artie arrived at my grandmother's house each day around seven in the morning from her room above the funeral home on Issaquena Street to work until

after seven at night. The window box fan in the hot kitchen turned ceaselessly and the little radio, caked with dried dough, was always on. Of all the children, I was the one who probably spent the most time with Artie. During our time together, she worked steadily, singing along with the gospel tunes on the radio and telling me that I was the “chosen one.” And I certainly believed that I was. She wanted me to learn her magic. The blending of yolk and oil in mayonnaise would only work if the clouds in the sky were fluffy white. The scallop thumbprints on the pie crust had to be mashed to the rhythm of the music. And the biscuit dough could only be flattened properly when her arthritic hands cupped over mine as we worked the rolling pin across the marble-topped table. In between mixing and stirring and chopping and cleaning, we talked about food and life and God: where it all came from and where we were all going.

When I think of Grandmama, Grandmother, and Artie, I understand most profoundly how each of us is a collection of our life experiences. As a child in the Deep South, I was blessed to have my mind, body and spirit fed at the tables of these three women. As a woman of the South, I have also come to understand through the lessons of these three women, that I am one of the keepers of the flame. And I believe that from the beginnings of our lives, Southern women, or for that matter all women, pass this flame on at the meal table. Thanks to these women, making cookbooks and making meals are ways I have to come to know myself.

The recipes in this book, culled from community cookbooks dating back to the Civil War, and the words of those whose recollections appear within these pages, not only embody the essence of Southern foodways but also reveal the dramatic changes that have come about in our society in the past century. These changes, married to the rhythm of time, come no matter what. So it is increasingly important that I pass on to my daughters Amy and Ellie, the values that have shaped my life. This book then, is part of my legacy to them so that they too can go forward into the twenty-first century with a firm grounding in the best of traditions that make the South unique.

A good cookbook is storybook compiled to document a time and place, revealing how we live in such intimate relationships. No matter what the food or the meal or the circumstance, when two or more are gathered at the meal table, we are connected – to the past, to one another, and to the future. This is why we eat in the South.

Ellen Robinson Rolfes

P.S. No self-respecting Southern woman could talk about the foodways of the South without at least a passing reference to her mother. My mother did not adopt the country ways of her mother or inherit the mantle of social director that was her mother-in-law's. Even by then, times had changed. But I do recollect the lemon pies that she baked every Saturday. I see so clearly the tangy confection piled high with golden meringue. It is part of a still life as it cools on a sheet of newspaper near the window next to three pairs of small white high-tops ready for Sunday school. This memory says to me that there are good cookbooks still to be written.