

Momma's Kitchen

No matter how many North Carolina restaurants Bob Holt visits, chefs he watches, or recipes he collects, his momma's cooking always tastes best.

by JEFFREY TURNER

photography and food styling by MATT HULSMAN • recipe testing and food styling by WENDY PERRY

BOB HOLT PREFERS TO ENTER restaurants through the back door. He says he likes to see the “heart and soul” of the place — the hands stirring a pot of collards, breading the fried chicken, and ensuring that every biscuit going out the window is fluffy and flaky.

Most folks don't get that kind of access, but Holt does. He sells commercial kitchen equipment; for 38 years, he traveled northeastern North Carolina for the Montgomery Green Company out of Raleigh, and today, he sells for a handful of clients near his home in Winterville.

At 70 years old, he's seen his share of kitchens, from the industrial-size ones at hospitals to those with wood-fired pits at roadside barbecue joints. And at each stop, he asked the local cooks about their techniques for cooking “at least as good as your mother could,” Holt says.

He took down what he learned at the end of each day on a yellow legal pad in whatever hotel room he stayed in for the night. And as Holt scribbled notes about time, temperature, and ingredients, his mind went back to his mother's kitchen in the Maxwell Mill area of rural Duplin County.

Back to the taste of her fried chicken served at Sunday lunch, fresh from the yard that morning and cooked in hog lard in a cast-iron skillet. Back to the taste of her homemade chocolate cake and how he swirled his finger around the bowl of excess batter on his fifth birthday to get every last drop.

When the folder full of Holt's handwritten notes began to bulge, he bottled the recipes and the memories in *Country Recipes and Other Interesting Stuff*, a 238-page cookbook that

for every comfort-food classic serves a colorful, homespun story on the side.

There's a recipe for Country Style Steak and Gravy and a story about how Holt's mother always beat the tough, sinewy, round steak into submission with the edge of a plate. If not technically an effective way to tenderize meat, the process made it easy enough to fall apart in your mouth.

Momma's Sunday Fried Chicken is in the book, too. After spending hours laboring over the chicken, Holt's mother always got the back because no one else would eat it.

And while he offers no anecdote in the book to explain the origins of his Apples, Taters, and Chops Casserole, he says it was a product of having plenty of time to experiment with food after divorcing his first wife.

“With nobody around to tell me not to, I messed up the kitchen a lot,” Holt says. “A lot of it went in the trash, but this (recipe) stuck.”

Like the others, this recipe stayed with him partly because pork chops were a staple in his mother's kitchen. She carefully turned them over in a cast-iron skillet until they were the right shade of brown, her hands working with the confidence that comes with experience. Holt and his three siblings sat restless around the dinner table, anxious to take a bite of the down-home masterpiece.

“It was Momma's cooking, after all,” Holt says, “and few could do it like her.”

Jeffrey Turner is the assistant editor of Our State magazine.



Momma's Sunday Fried Chicken

- 1 cup all-purpose flour
- ½ teaspoon salt
- ¼ teaspoon black pepper
- 1 whole hen, about 3½ pounds
- ½ cup hog lard

Mix flour, salt, and pepper in a brown-paper bag. Cut up the chicken, place it in the bag, and shake to cover. (Momma cut chickens into 12 pieces: 2 pieces of breast; 2 pieces with the end joint cut off; 2 thighs; 2 legs; 2 pieces of back with the oysters, neck, and wishbone. Everything was bone-in and skin-on.) Put a large, cast-iron skillet on a burner to heat. Add lard to hot pan. Arrange chicken pieces in skillet. Cover, and cook for 15 minutes at medium-high heat. Lay on a towel to drain, and then arrange on a platter.

IMAGE OF BOOK BY BERT VANDERVEEN



Apples, Taters, and Chops Casserole

- Canola oil
- 6 center-cut, 1-inch-thick pork chops, bone-in
- 1 teaspoon season salt
- ½ teaspoon coarsely ground black pepper
- 4 apples, Granny Smith, Golden Delicious, or your favorite, cored
- 4 medium-size sweet potatoes, peeled and sliced
- 1 Vidalia onion, chopped
- 1 cup white wine
- 1 teaspoon Worcestershire sauce

Pour a little canola oil in a hot skillet, and brown the chops. Remove, and set in a 9-inch x 13-inch casserole dish; sprinkle with half of the salt and pepper. Place the apples and sweet potato slices over the chops, and season with the remaining salt and pepper. Sauté the onion in the hot skillet, adding the wine and Worcestershire sauce. Pour onion mixture over the apples, potatoes, and chops. Cover, and bake at 375° for 1½ hours.

Country Style Steak and Gravy

- 1 cup canola oil or hog lard
- 1 pound round steak, cut into 4-ounce pieces
- Salt and pepper to taste
- 1 egg, beaten with 3 tablespoons milk
- 3 cups milk
- 1½ cups and 3 tablespoons all-purpose flour

Heat the oil to about 350° to 360°. Season the well-beaten pieces of steak; then coat with flour, shaking off the excess. Dip the pieces in egg wash, allow to drain, and dip back in the flour. Gently shake off the excess, and brown the pieces on both sides for about 3 minutes.

Remove the meat, and reserve ¼ cup grease and all the bits and pieces in the bottom of the pan. Add 3 tablespoons flour and 3 cups milk to the pan. Whisking constantly, continue cooking the gravy for about 4 minutes on medium-low heat. Season with salt and pepper to taste, and cook another 8 to 9 minutes. The gravy should be the consistency of heavy cream. If it's too thick, add a little water. Plate the steak over mashed potatoes or rice, and generously cover with gravy.

