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All You Can Eat

Seattle Times food writer Nancy Leson serves up the best info and tips on Northwest food, cooking, dining and restaurants.

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May 6, 2009 at 11:57 AM

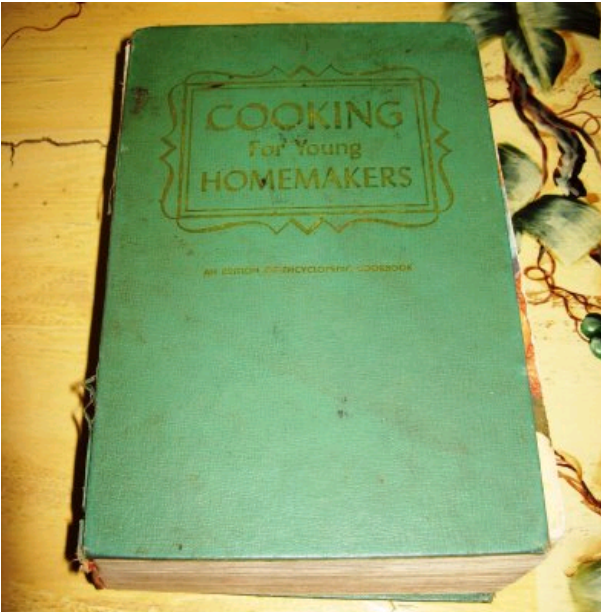
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Oh, Joy! Mom's hand-me-down cookbooks. Got one?

Posted by [Nancy Leson](#)

My mother cooked -- when she wasn't too busy working. But unlike me, she was not [a cookbook junkie](#). Instead the shelves in our Philadelphia kitchen, handcrafted by Howard my handy stepfather, held a single tome wedged between two heart-shaped bottles of Paul Masson: "Cooking for Young Homemakers." The book's most intriguing quality was, to my thinking, the fact that hiding in its pages was a yellowed newspaper clipping of my mother's nemesis: my exceedingly beautiful stepmother, Betty -- circa 1967-ish.

In the photo, Betty and her beehive hairdo were found smiling in the front row at a Tom Jones concert at the [Latin Casino](#) in Cherry Hill, N.J., where suburban women were reputed to have thrown their panties at the stage. Years later, when mom moved out of our house (sans Howard), driving past the Latin Casino to her new home at the Jersey Shore, she handed that book down to my sister Sherry:



Mom's old cookbook, stained, tattered and much beloved by my sister, Sherry

I called my sister this morning to ask about the cookbook. She told me she keeps it on her baker's rack in her East Coast kitchen where, she notes, it sits devoid of the clipping of our stepmother, seen in *this* yellowed photograph at [Zazu](#), where I introduced her to the joys of former Seattleite Duskie Estes' California cookery last year:

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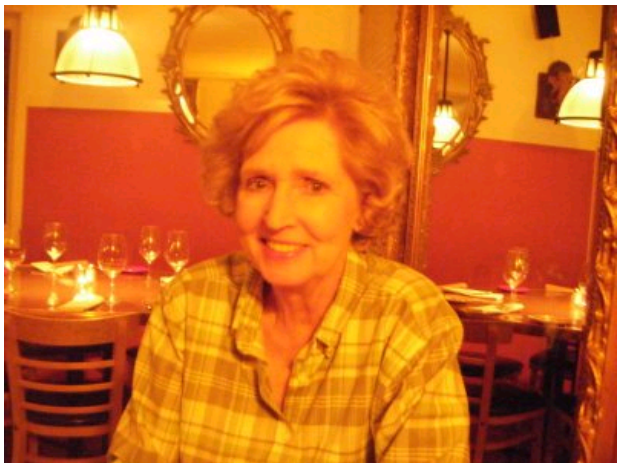
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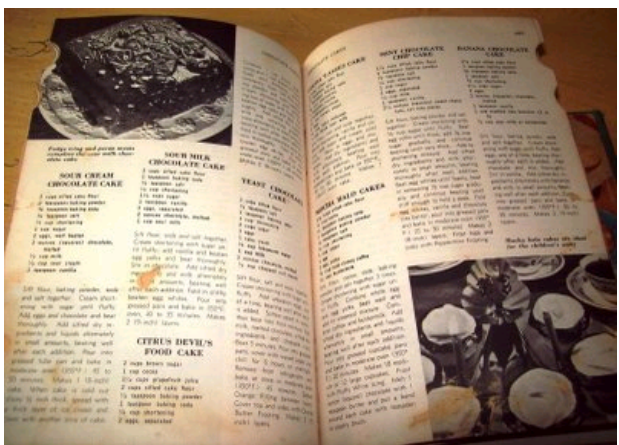
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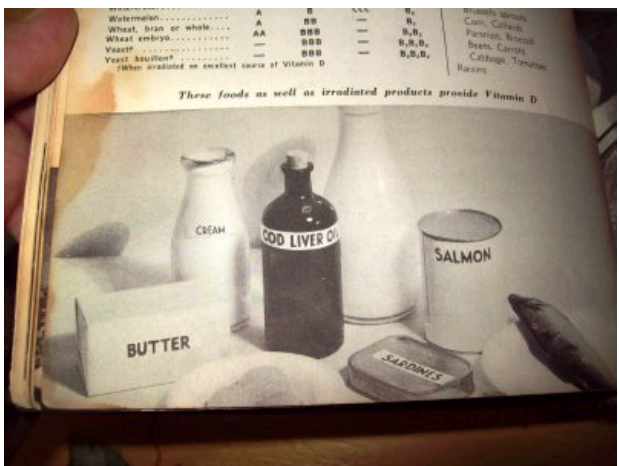
My "wicked stepmother" -- 40-plus years after famously attending a Tom Jones concert.

I didn't feel the slightest bit slighted that my mother chose to gift that book to Sherry. She deserved it. (Bubbie's hand-chopper? *That's* another story.) Because when I won myself a scholarship to [boarding school](#) at 15, later lighting out for the territories and my own kitchen, it was my sister -- 11 months my junior -- who became the defacto cook at 8512 Bergen Place. There, she made "Shrimp a la Schecter" (as I'd done before her), introduced our neighbor Natie Katz to the joys of eating bacon (defying his kosher-keeping parents) and regularly stained the pages of "Cooking for Young Homemakers," favoring, she tells me, a recipe for chocolate cake:



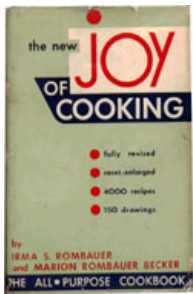
"Those are my food stains, not mom's," says Sherry

Fortunately for our younger siblings, she used Crisco instead of cod liver oil:



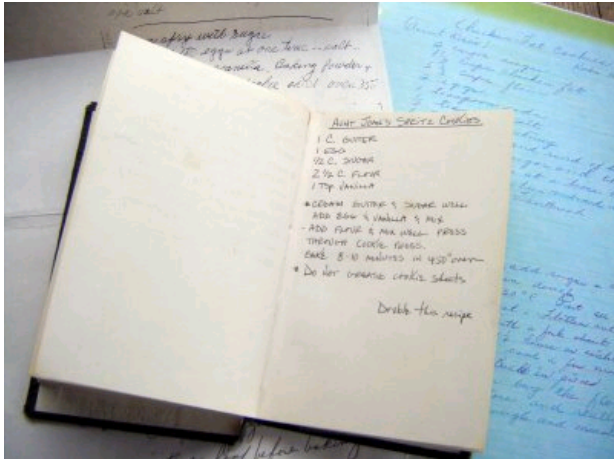
That special added ingredient -- vitamin D!

Which brings me to a survey by [AbeBooks.com](#) -- an on-line retailer of new, used and collectible volumes. Abe Books asked over 500 cookbook-buying customers to name their most treasured culinary heirlooms. Results in hand, they published a list of sentimental favorites, noting a whopping 96 percent were passed down by a grandmother, mother or mother-in-law. Check out [this link](#) for a list of the top 10 most frequently handed-down cookbooks, complete with photos of those (oft tattered and torn) bookcovers -- which bear a certain cultural resemblance to "Cooking for Young Homemakers." The No. 1 slot, no surprise, went to "The Joy of Cooking" -- first published in 1931.



"The Joy of Cooking," copyright 1953, courtesy AbeBooks.com

So, in honor of my mother, my stepmother, my sister and my son (who will one day own a very special cookery book passed on by his mother), I've got to ask: Do you own an "heirloom" cookbook? What is it? How long has it been in your family? Who gave it to you?



Nancy's handwritten "heirloom cookbook" -- which will someday belong to Nate

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Comments (27)

My treasure is Modern Home Cook Book by Grace E. Denison, published in 1938. There is a recipe of Finnan Haddie as well as instructions how to keep... Posted on May 6, 2009 at 12:45 PM by jack69. [Jump to comment](#)

Update on my wife's oldest cookbook. Turns out that the 1923 is actually a 1926, but it's still a virtual babe compared to the oldest.... Posted on May 6, 2009 at 6:58 PM by WM. [Jump to comment](#)

My mom, and my beloved mother-in-law were terrible cooks, each in their own way, LOL. My sister got all mom's cookbooks because she... Posted on May 10, 2009 at 11:15 PM by B. Leigh. [Jump to comment](#)

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