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The cookbook- My Bride and I

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'I was defenseless against her southern charm.'

By a strange quirk of nature I grew up eating, and relishing things like fried chicken with gobets of thick brown gravy, creamed-potatoes with big hunks of butter melting in the middle and running down the sides, steaks smothered with heaps and heaps of delectable onions, fresh spring corn-on-the-cob with grains just bursting with golden goodness, fist-size biscuits oozing huge drops of crystal-clear honey, and deep cobblers jammed with apples, peaches, and strawberries. Like most southern boys, I gobbled eaten' like that till I reckon I just took it for granted—till I met Sarah.

'Ripe for Picking'

I must have been ripe for picking 'cause I was completely defenseless against her southern charm. She was tall, willowy, had big brown eyes that beamed warmth and affection, and could stretch a little old word like "to" or "it" into a five-minute address. It's no wonder I was down the aisle, out of the church, and firmly planted in the galley of my 31-foot house trailer before food crossed my mind again. When it did, I couldn't even turn around, let alone retreat.

(Everything was fine for the first few weeks after our marriage, for we didn't eat regularly anyway. But as our menu began to waver from bologna sandwiches and Pepsi-Colas, I began to suspect what couldn't remain hidden indefinitely. It really dawned on me one morning at breakfast.

One of our wedding gifts had been a waffle iron, and this was our first chance to try it out. According to the instruction sheet, when the little orange light on the contraption went out the waffles should be done to golden perfection.

Light Went Out

Well, the light went out but the waffles evidently couldn't read the directions. They wouldn't turn loose of the iron, and Sarah couldn't figure out why—unless they weren't done. So down came the lid again, and it never once crossed Sarah's mind that she had forgotten to add the shortening to the waffle mix. A few minutes later, I felt my way through the steady bellow of smoke pouring from this "breakfast-table dragon" and began scraping the finest waffle-crisps I had ever seen from the little valleys in the iron.

While I ate the syrup-softened waffle-crisps, I also did a little thinking. And during the next few days I did a little more. A few succeeding instances had convinced me that, unless I was completely willing to abandon my normal digestive processes, I had better have a talk with mother.

Mother understood the situation a little better than I did.

"Son, unlike most southern girls, Sarah obviously hasn't had a chance to learn to cook. Now, if you really want to help her, you'll just have to brag on her cooking—even if it doesn't taste as good as mine."

So being an obedient son (and a hopeful husband), I gritted my teeth, cast my George Washington "I cannot-tell-a-lie" conviction out the window, and set out to brag on Sarah's cooking. And, come ulcers or high water, I meant to do just that.

Bit of Indigestion

Deep down inside (although I hesitate to admit it) I understood what Sarah was going through. I knew for every bit of indigestion I was to suffer, Sarah would suffer many times as much from pure, frustrated disappointment.

Frosting streaked her hair.
A few evenings later I came home to find my new bride in the middle of baking a cake. And when I say in the middle, I’m not exaggerating one bit. A veil of cake flour hung heavily around the table, shortening stuck to her slacks, and frosting streaked her hair—left there by a frustrated swipe of her hand. The reason for it all—a very odd-shaped little cake—sat on the table.

“Do you want to tell me about it, honey?” I asked.

From her somewhat unorganized relations I managed to piece together what had happened. The layers had been baked without a hitch. Then, not realizing the difference, Sarah had substituted granulated sugar for powdered sugar in the recipe for uncooked frosting. And the result, of course, was gritty icing. When the upper layer wouldn’t stay on the lower layer, Sarah had tried to even things up bypushing with a knife on each side. The cake wound up looking like a sand dune after hurricane Hazel.

**Salvage Confidence**

Wanting to salvage as much of Sarah’s confidence as possible and remembering mother’s instructions, I tried with all that was in me to force that cake down. But that’s where the coward was separated from the heroes. I tried to explain as sweetly as I could about how I had spent 22 years growing the enamel covering on my teeth and I just couldn’t stand having it worn off trying to eat one cake with sandy icing. I began to feel like a heel for not showing more courage, but to my amazement, Sarah admitted that she had misread the recipe and she didn’t care whether I ate the old thing or not. Some things don’t need a recipe though, she cooed, like gravy, for instance.

A week or so later, I heard a commotion in the kitchen and decided, against my better judgement, to see what was causing it all. I might have guessed it. There in the frying pan, browning nicely, was the prettiest little gravy pancake I had ever seen.

“But I didn’t think I needed a recipe to make gravy,” Sarah said, not knowing whether to laugh or cry. “I guess I was wrong, huh?”

“Don’t worry about it, sugar-bunch,” I chimed through uncontrolled laughter, “I’ve seen mother do that dozens of times.”

**Adjustments**

While my duodenum made its adjustments, I learned how to help farther up the line. I found that camouflage wasn’t limited to shooten-up warfare. It’s surprising what tomato catsup can do for queer-tasting meats and vegetables. I even got the idea of constructing a survival kit for prospective husbands—built around tomato catsup and bromo seltzer. This thing had real possibilities, I thought.

But slowly I lost my desire to push my survival-kit idea any further. Actually, I lost any good reason to. For along with the waffle iron and our other assorted wedding gifts had come a lifesaver—a wonderfully thick Better Homes and Gardens Cookbook.

In the weeks that followed, with the help of the cookbook and various ready mixes, the girl who couldn’t tell baking powder from gunpowder was baking splendid cakes and biscuits, turning out delicious indigestion-free meat dishes, making tasty salads, spending all my money for groceries, and enjoying every minute of it. Although this southern gall had shocked me senseless earlier, she was now proving that anything she might have lacked in experience was highly outweighed by her desire to learn.

**Southern Cooking**

Now that my digestive processes are again cruising along at normal, I wouldn’t trade these last few months for any amount of good southern cooking. I realize now that the most important thing in the world to a bride is being able to do the things her husband expects of her. To Sarah, learning to cook “like mother” was a major triumph over a frightening opponent, and her happiness radiated dozens of ways.

Today we both laugh about the cinnamon that was left out of the cinnamon rolls, about the time Sarah stood over the stove fussing about “all those little holes popping up through my pancakes” and about all the other miscues.

But if you really want to know why I’m grinning like a possum in a sour grape vine—I’ll tell you. I HAD TO CHANGE MY TUNE. How else could I possibly explain the fact that I’m gaining weight?