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He Cooked In The Clouds

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He Cooked

In The Clouds

THE life of a Forest Service Lookout includes more than reporting forest fires. While making his home on some lofty mountain peak, miles from his nearest neighbor, the lookout has ample opportunity to discover the art of cooking.

Cooking may be a science to the culinary technician but those who attain proficiency mainly through experience know it as an art.

It was in this manner that I learned cooking. I spent three months as a lookout in a western national forest, alone except for an occasional visitor. Under these circumstances one cooks for himself or starves. Few lookouts starve.

I knew little about preparing food but I soon discovered that it wasn't difficult and could be fun. I knew a few time-saving tricks—mostly "things my mother taught me"—and as my experience grew this number increased. By the end of my second season above the clouds my collection of time and effort-savers was extensive.

My plain wood range had no oven thermometer so to determine the temperature of the oven I put a piece of paper or bread inside. If the paper browned quickly, the oven was hot. If it browned slowly, I had a moderate oven. If there was no reaction, I put more wood on the fire.

Poached eggs may sound like sissy food for a forester, but I had them and, after a few unsuccessful attempts, I added a little vinegar to the water before dropping in the eggs. This prevented the yolks from breaking. I soon learned through trial and error, and mostly error, that the water should be boiling before adding the egg. This may sound elementary, but I learned the hard way after scraping egg white from several pans in which the water wasn't hot enough.

Most foresters are not famed for cleanliness, and there was one time when I decided being lazy had its advantage. My luck in frying foods was poor until an old forester told me not to wash the pan after each use. He claimed that washing removed the oil from minute pores in the metal and increased the possibility of food sticking to the pan. After mutilating several scouring pads, I decided that more grease in the pan meant less from the elbow and took his advice.

My pie crust recipes called for shortening to be cut into the dry ingredients but that took too long. I melted the shortening, poured it in and stirred the mixture until I thought it looked about right. I found these pie crusts to be as tender and flaky as those made the hard way.

At first I turned my pancakes twice while baking them but this method gave a product more closely resembling shoe soles. Not being short of shoe stamps, I decided one flip was sufficient.

Frequently I have become involved in many heated discussions on the relative merits of practical and theoretical cooking. Almost invariably, my opponent asks if I can produce a soufflé. No, I can't even pronounce the word, but I counter. "Can you mash potatoes?"

There is more to mashing potatoes than appears on the surface. After eating lumpy ones for awhile I decided they should be mashed finely before adding milk or butter. In my opinion he who can successfully mash potatoes is a good cook.—*Dick Crowther*