The Course That Created A Cookbook

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The Course That

Miss Lenore Sullivan vows she'll never write another cookbook. But the recipe files bulge, and friends hope she'll soon change her mind.

by Bonnie Rollins
Home Economics Senior

Good food is a creative art, a prominent part of our cultural heritage and a unique road to understanding and friendship among the peoples of the world, believes Miss Lenore Sullivan, instructor in Institution Management. Her philosophies and her fascination for food have made Institution Management 585 so popular that was probably the only class on campus for which outsiders depleted the supply of outlines before the class could buy copies. Delightful by-product of the course is Miss Sullivan's charming book "What to Cook for Company."

Catering, as 585 is popularly called, is a course in cookery appreciation. As with art and music appreciation courses, students learn the finer points of a country's background by studying, preparing and tasting favorite foods of each national cuisine. It's the latter test which tells the tale as far as the class is concerned. Tasting new dishes in catering labs introduces an exciting approach to food by emphasizing food as an adventure in living.

About 4 p.m. each afternoon the stage is set for the taste test. The gaily decorated tearoom may present the atmosphere of a Mexican fiesta, a Southern plantation dinner, gay Paree or the exotic countries of the Orient. Heavily laden buffet tables speak well for the girls' ability to prepare the traditional foods of the cuisine under study. Students gather around the table, fascinated as Miss Sullivan explains the little special details of each dish. Her enthusiasm is contagious, her stories engaging as she points out that no tomato ever found its way into true New England clam chowder. The savory French dish Chicken Marengo happened one day by accident. After the fierce battle of Marengo won by Napoleon, food supplies were so scarce that the cook rounded up what was available, simmered it in a skillet and concocted this mouth-watering dish, she continues.

As Miss Sullivan completes her final comments the class eagerly anticipates sampling the foods. A spoonful of one dish, a bite of another, a taste of a third and before long the girls are around the table, their dinner plate overflowing. The second time through is "proof" that the girls are apt students of appreciation.

As Miss Sullivan has taught the course for many quarters, one might think she would be more than glad to firmly say 'no' to the calorie-laden treats. Admitting that she wages a losing fight in the battle of the bulge, Miss Sullivan explains she just can't pass up any of the food. "After all, if I don't taste all the foods the girls have prepared, how will I know that they did as good a job as the class before them," she laughs.

In laboratories new recipes often are introduced. One "hot" incident over a new food occurred in the preparation of chili con carne. The original recipe calling for 8 teaspoons of chili powder made hair stand on end and throats feel like the aftermath of a human fire-eating demonstration. One taste was enough to convince the class that something more like 2 teaspoons of the fiery powder would suffice.

The experimenting, testing, tasting and general work in the catering course were the main factors leading to publication of "What to Cook for Company." Enriched with an Iowa heritage and personalized with a touch of foreign flavor, the book is a combination of recipes involving specialized cookery, general principles of food preparations, and exotic recipes of internationally famous foods.

The book is like Topsy, relates Miss Sullivan, "It just grew" — from original mimeographed recipe sheets to the 500-plus page volume now in print. When the original mimeographed recipes became too cumbersome to handle, college bookstore officials suggested that the material be printed in book form. So laden with her huge collection of recipes, Miss Sullivan began her production with gusto in 1949. Vacations were forgotten; work continued around the clock and around the calendar for the next three years. Every moment she could squeeze between classroom duties, departmental meetings and professional obligations, Miss Sullivan spent gathering more recipes, writing, testing, standardizing, rewriting and rewriting the material to be included in the book.
Created a Cookbook

Although distinctly an Iowa-product, between the covers the book is spiced with a trace of rich foreign elements and regional delicacies of the United States—contributions of Miss Sullivan's cosmopolitan and well-traveled students. The cherished family favorites represent Finland, India, Hawaii, England, Sweden, the South, East, Middle West and Pennsylvania Dutch areas of the United States. Many are from the personal collection Miss Sullivan continues to amass in her travels across the continent and over the world.

With all of its individual features another touch was needed for the book, for competing with more than 700 other cookbooks in print would not be easy. A special personality was added to the 924 recipes by including a legend after many recipes telling something about the contributor, mentioning a historical note about the food or including a suggestion for serving. The book was completed in 1951 and off the press by Christmas of the following year. “What to Cook for Company” is presently in the fifth printing.

Commenting on the book, a visitor to catering class told Miss Sullivan that she had received one of the early autographed copies. “Well,” laughed Miss Sullivan, “Autographing the book was probably the easiest part of the whole thing.”

Always looking for another new idea, an exciting dish to add to the catering course outline, a heavenly dessert to try for a party, Miss Sullivan now spends her free moments thumbing through stacks of new magazines (for which she possesses an undying weakness) and mountains of cookbooks piled in her tiny office. Jokingly, yet with determination she vows to friends she’ll never write another cookbook. But the recipes keep piling up; the files are bulging; and friends reassure themselves hopefully that it won’t be long before the new delights find their way into a revised edition of “What to Cook for Company,” the cookbook which makes good food a creative art.

Drawing on a vast knowledge of food gathered from many cookbooks and in all parts of the country, Miss Le-nore Sullivan, Department of Institution Management, explains the finer points of each of the dishes prepared by her classes in Catering. Each member of the class prepares one dish on the theme for the day, be it New England cookery or Christmas sweets, and then all place their food on a table such as this for sampling and evaluation. Delightful by-product of this course is Miss Sullivan’s cookbook, “What to Cook for Company.”