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Book Review: The Blue Ribbon Cook Book

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Benedict, Jennie C. *The Blue Ribbon Cook Book*. Reprint of the 4th ed. 1922. Lexington, KY: The University Press of Kentucky, 2008. 978-0-8131-2518-3. \$19.95

During the early part of the twentieth century, Jennie C. Benedict became a mainstay in Louisville Kentucky culinary circles. Her catering business became regionally renowned and in 1923 she was offered \$1 million to move her operations to St. Louis – local outcry prevented the move. She published several editions of “The Blue Ribbon Cookbook” which quickly became a favorite in many kitchens. Her 4th edition (1922) is now being republished with an introduction by former Louisville Courier-Journal restaurant critic Susan Reigler. Cooks will once again be able to prepare these simple, Southern-style recipes for a new generation.

With so many cookbooks available in the market, this publication does fill its own niche. Many of today’s cookbooks specialize in a variety of areas. Benedict’s cookbook on the other hand provides a variety of over 300 recipes. The cookbook is easy to use with many practical suggestions for novice and experienced cooks. While it doesn’t offer as many recipes as the general Betty Crocker or Duncan Hines cookbooks, it is similar to the many “church cookbooks” that are difficult to obtain in the mass market. Southern recipes are evident throughout the book including Dixie biscuits, okra soup, gravy, mashed potatoes, molasses pound cake. The book includes a glossary which includes practical suggestions such as the sequence for adding dry ingredients for a cake mix, the proper method for cooking vegetables, and also basic definitions – “Boiling is to cook in boiling water”! The book is divided into the major sections found in most general cookbooks (breads, soups, desserts, etc.). The book also contains “unique” sections appropriate to the era of publication – “Simple dishes for the sick (toast water, creamed oatmeal, etc.), and “Dainty menus convalescent patients”. The book also contains menu suggestions for luncheons and dinners. Surprisingly, none of Benedict’s editions contains the recipe for one of her most noted recipes – Benedictine spread, a sandwich made with cucumber juice and cream cheese. Reigler includes this recipe and variations in her introduction.

Evidence of the era of publication can be found throughout the text. Due to the lack of temperature controls in early twentieth century ovens, consistent temperatures could not be maintained. This is evidenced throughout the text in two major ways: 1) lack of temperature indicators in the recipes and 2) lack of length of cooking time for some of the recipes. Cooks today are used to seeing exact temperature and timing requirements for recipes. This text delineates temperature ranges with the following verbiage: “bake in a quick oven, bake in a moderate oven, bake in a hot oven” and variants in between. Timings are not indicated or if so are vague – “bake slowly”. While experienced cooks may know what is considered “a quick oven”, etc. it would have been helpful to define this for novice cooks. Also, some recipes do not list ingredients in a separate listing and must be taken from the cooking directions.

This text will be useful both for the novice and experienced cook to locate those long lost recipes which were often passed from cook to cook. Libraries especially in the south will find this a popular book for their collection.

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