Written by Carol Pomeday
Wednesday, 06 April 2011 15:30

Jeannine Colla of Grafton cut a slice of Bob Hope's lemon pie for her daughter Gaile Colla. Photo by Sam ArendtIn 1960, Jeannine Colla clipped a recipe from a movie star she found in a newspaper. For her next dinner party, she prepared the dish.

"It was such a hit, I decided it would be great to have a collection of favorite recipes of influential people in other fields besides film stars," said Colla, who embarked on what turned into a two-year quest to collect recipes from such an array of notable people that they create more a snapshot of a time period than a cookbook.

President John F. Kennedy sent a recipe for New England fish chowder.

A lemon meringue pie recipe came from Bob Hope. Ed Sullivan said his mother's bread pudding is the best he's ever tasted so he sent her recipe.

Eleanor Roosevelt provided a simple recipe for huckleberry pudding.

Walt Disney sent a chili and beans recipe. Lyndon B. Johnson, who was then vice president, said Pedernales River chili was his favorite dish, while Roy Rogers preferred a hominy and chili casserole.

Liberace provided recipes for low-calorie spinach noodles and braggiole sauce.

Pierre Salinger noted, "I've always been one interested in matters of the stomach" when he sent his recipe for artichoke chicken.

However, T.S. Eliot's secretary wrote, "Mr. Eliot is of the opinion that only children should be allowed to have one favorite dish. A dish all depends on the other dishes arranged for the same meal and the wines to go with them."

The responses, a few handwritten and many of them signed, were cherished and preserved by Colla, a retired research chemist who lives in Grafton.

How the cookbook, "Dents de Lion, Teeth of the Lion: A Collection of Recipes from Distinguished Individuals," was compiled in the early 1960s but not published until almost 50 years later is an intriguing story.

Colla was a young mother of two children living in Shorewood who loved to cook and entertain when she decided a book of recipes from famous people would be fun and interesting to compile.

She spent hours searching through books and periodicals for names and addresses at the Milwaukee Public Library, then hand wrote personal letters to hundreds of people all over the world requesting a recipe for her cookbook.

"At the time I wasn't a chemist, but I was interested in the sciences so I wanted to include scientists," Colla said. "Scientists were hard to find, let alone get their addresses. I wrote when the children slept.

"It took a long time because I hand wrote every one, but I think that's why I got so many responses. I don't think I would have gotten the same response if I had typed the letters. It was a challenge to get past secretaries."

Her mother, who studied in Paris, composed letters in French for people in French-speaking countries. A chef at Mader's Restaurant in Milwaukee translated recipes sent in German.

As the recipes started arriving in her mailbox, Colla said, every day was like Christmas as she eagerly opened the envelopes.

Colla's postman noticed the stationery from heads of state and foreign countries, so he figured they were important and hand-delivered the letters.

"That made my husband very nervous. It was during the time everyone was afraid of

Communism and people were being accused of being Communist," Colla said. "He was afraid people would think we were Communists, but I didn't think requesting a recipe could be considered subversive."

The best responses were those that included handwritten or typed comments about the recipes, she said.

"Getting to sports people was really difficult. I got a lot of baseball cards and autographed photographs but only one, Sam Snead, sent a recipe," Colla said.

She and a friend typed the recipes as they were submitted. Some listed ingredients, followed by instructions, while others were narratives. They sorted the recipes by food categories.

Colla wrote an introduction and sent the manuscript to Putnam Publishing in New York. She heard nothing for seven months, then received it back with a rejection letter.

In the meantime, she went to bookstores to see if similar books had been published.

"There were several, including one published by Putnam. They tended to have a couple of movie stars and called it a celebrity cookbook," Colla said. "I wanted mine to be different."

Discouraged by the rejection, Colla set the cookbook aside, had another child and concentrated on raising her family while pursuing a chemistry degree.

She was a research chemist for Johnson Controls in Milwaukee for 25 years.

Three years ago, she and her husband moved to Grafton. Her husband died in 2009.

Colla would periodically pull out the cookbook and show it to her children.

Recently, her daughter Gaile Colla, who lives in Mequon, asked if she could copy the book for herself and other family members.

Colla said she waited in the car for a long time while her daughters had the 150-page cookbook copied.

"They came out laughing," Colla said. "They said the manager wanted to read the book and wouldn't give it up. I thought maybe it would be worth another try (to have it published). Maybe other people will want to read it."

After contacting several publishers, Colla contracted with Tate Publishing of Oklahoma to print the cookbook.

Gaile retyped the book on her computer and transferred it to CDs.

The recipes were not kitchen tested, she said.

"We have so many short-cuts in our cooking now that these seem very plain. You can tell they're from that era," Colla said.

"I think of it more as a coffee-table book or a hostess gift than a cookbook to learn to make something. There are plenty of cookbooks for that. This is more for the history."

Colla included several letters from people who didn't submit recipes but made interesting comments about food.

She's not comfortable being called an author, Colla said, because she didn't write the recipes.

"I don't even have a recipe of my own in it, and I wouldn't let my mother put hers in," she said.

"The title is mine. I thought I had to include one thing that was me. Some people may not get it, but these were great people, lions in their fields."

Colla will discuss her book and sign copies at 7 p.m. Wednesday, May 4, at Next Chapter Bookshop, 10976 N. Port Washington Rd., Mequon. She plans to prepare several of the recipes for people to sample.

"Dents de Lion" is available as an e-book and in paperback from www.tatepublishing.com/bookstore, barnesandnoble.com and amazon.com. Colla is willing to speak to organizations about her book.