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A Conversation with Nancy Carter Crump

Author of *Hearthside Cooking: Early American Southern Cuisine Updated for Today's
Hearth and Cookstove*, Second Edition

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Q: How does this edition of *Hearthside Cooking* differ from the version that was first published in 1986?

A: There is extensive new information on the development of Virginia foods, from the seventeenth-century beginnings as the English colonists settled here and added Native-American foodways to their own familiar fare. I also emphasize the importance of slave cooks and their contributions to what became southern food, and the changes that occurred in the nineteenth century through the Civil War period. There is a new foreword by Sandra Oliver, editor and publisher of *Food History News* and a new source list, among other things.

Q: What is hearthside cooking?

A: Quite simply, hearthside cooking is the preparation of food over an open fire or on hot coals that are positioned in areas of the hearth in front of the fire—something like the burners on a stove.

Q: How and where do you hope this book will be used?

A: *Hearthside Cooking* has been used extensively by hearth cooks at historic sites, by museum interpreters who teach open-hearth cooking, and by adventurous cooks who want to cook in their fireplaces at home or try the recipes in a modern setting. Reenactors use *Hearthside Cooking* to prepare meals at public events, and even campers and scout groups have found the book useful. I hope the new edition continues to attract these audiences as well as those who just want to try some of the updated recipes.

Q: What are some of the challenges in recreating historical recipes? Can we ever really know what a dish tasted like in the past?

A: If the recipes are prepared on the hearth, careful attention should be given to the directions provided, especially the types of fire needed for various recipes. Safety measures are especially important and they are emphasized in the book. In a twenty-first-century setting, of course, there should be no difficulty in following the modern versions.

[more]

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I don't think it is possible to duplicate exactly the tastes of the past. While the Industrial Revolution brought positive changes to the way we live today, it had a negative effect on foodways. Chemical leavening agents, for instance, influence the taste of baked goods. We can come close, though, by buying directly from local farmers and suppliers.

Q: How do hearthside cooking demonstrations make history come alive and help bridge the gap between our ancestors and us?

A: First of all, I have never encountered an audience at a demonstration that isn't interested in food—it truly is a common denominator that links us across time. People are fascinated by the process, astounded at the variety of foods that can be prepared on the hearth—virtually anything that can be done in a modern kitchen. And those that can taste some of the foods cooked on the hearth are delighted to discover just how good it is.

Q: What sparked your interest in hearthside cooking?

A: It was really an evolutionary process that began with a catering business I ran in the 1970s to help pay college expenses. I specialized in historical parties, which led to researching old recipes, menus, party descriptions and so forth. Later, as an educational programmer for Colonial Williamsburg, I helped develop hearth programs for school children and had my first experiences with cooking on a hearth. The rest, as they say, is history.

Q: How do you go about finding and selecting these enticing historic Virginia recipes?

A: Primarily by digging through letters, diaries, recipe collections and so forth in archives at different locations. The Virginia Historical Society in Richmond and the Southern Historical Collection at Chapel Hill to name two. I have also been fortunate in that many people who still own family collections permitted me to see and use their historic recipes. The Hill Carters at Shirley Plantation, for instance, have been generous in sharing their family history.

Q: What kinds of challenges did you face when interpreting older recipes, or “receipts” as they were once known?

A: Recipes written in the past are far different from those we record today. Ingredients were generally given in avoirdupois weight, and a set of scales was an essential piece of equipment in old kitchens. Determining what the writer intended requires experimentation and a willingness to test the recipes repeatedly, along with a certain sense of adventure to arrive at measurements and methods in use today.

Q: What implements are essential for hearthside cooking? Where can one buy them?

A: A few basic implements can be used for those who want to try cooking with fire. Essential tools include a swinging crane, some pothangers, and a couple of Dutch ovens with concave tops to hold coals, along with some long-handled tools such as a spoon and tongs. The book provides [more]

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information on these and other implements, how to use them, and sources where equipment can be purchased.

Q: You include fourteen bills of fare. What might a Virginia plantation's dinner menu include?

A: Lots of food served in multiple courses! A soup to begin the meal was essential, followed by an array of foods from seafood to pork, vegetables, pickles, and sweets of varying kinds. This, of course, changes as the nineteenth century progresses.

Q: How large a role did vegetables play in the early Virginia diet? Which were most popular?

A: Vegetables were widely used, with asparagus and peas two of the most popular. Salads were also part of the meal. I provide a recipe adapted from a 1699 book, *Aceteria*, that is a classic vinaigrette and is a revelation to people who do not expect salad greens to be a part of an old-style bill of fare.

Q: What do you think will surprise modern readers most about these early recipes? Are there any misconceptions about our ancestors that you correct?

A: The sophistication of the old recipes is always a surprise. For example, vegetables were not overcooked. Our foremothers were much more knowledgeable about the use of herbs and other seasonings than most people realize.

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