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from North Carolina

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A conversation with Foy Allen Edelman

Author of *Sweet Carolina: Favorite Desserts and Candies from the Old North State*

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Q: What inspired you to travel across NC and collect recipes?

A: Exploring North Carolina has been a lifelong pleasure for me. When I was a child, my parents took me to many parts of the state; I inherited their love and respect for North Carolina, history, and storytelling.

All my life I've attended covered dish dinners and other social functions that included home cooked dishes. The people I met told stories about favorite foods that maintained ties with home. I was fascinated by all the traditional yet varied ways to prepare dishes.

In 2001, I was out-placed from my job. The idea occurred to me that I could combine two things that I had enjoyed all my life—collecting recipes and meeting people from every part of the state. Suddenly, the opportunity to pursue my dream emerged, and I reached out to embrace it.

I've collected recipes since I was a little girl, and now I have around 300 North Carolina cookbooks and copies of handwritten manuscripts kept by four women from different parts of North Carolina during the nineteenth century. I even have a reproduction of *Dixie Cookery* by Maria Massey Barringer of Concord. It's dated 1867, and, to my knowledge, it's the first cookbook published by a North Carolinian. My collection would be incomplete, though, without having met today's cooks in their own homes across the state. Meeting them was enlightening, entertaining, and just plain old fun. I'd be honored to call any of the people I met my friends.

Q: What is your history with North Carolina and North Carolina cooking?

A: I was born in eastern North Carolina in 1950. My daughter was born in Wilmington. After my mother died in 2006, I found a family genealogy that links us to more than thirty North Carolina counties.

I have a good life in North Carolina and feel very fortunate to be here. I've traveled and
[more]

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2-2-2 Sweet Carolina

lived abroad, and I can honestly say that I've never come across any lifestyle I prefer more. Hospitality is at the heart of my personal interpretation of that lifestyle. I've always thought of the dinner table as the real stage where much of our communal life is acted out and shared. Other than being with my family, nothing makes me happier than having people gather together around my table when it's covered with linen, silver, and crystal to enjoy home cooked dishes.

I was raised on a cooking style that uses locally grown ingredients with straightforward methods of preparation. My mother and our African-American housekeeper and cook combined their culinary talents in the kitchen where I got to spend time with them from about age four. Everybody cooked at home during the 1950s; the economy was sluggish, but our agriculture was bountiful and richly celebrated.

Q: Why did you choose to focus on dessert and candy recipes in this book? What's so special about North Carolina desserts?

A: I asked people for recipes that they'd prepare for their families, not any particular group like breads or main dishes. I had planned one book, but was surprised to find that over half of the 500 recipes I had collected were for desserts and candies. *Sweet Carolina* contains 230 recipes by itself.

Q: How did you seek out the contributors you include in the book? Are they from all across North Carolina?

A: Almost everybody has at least one much loved recipe, so I started collecting recipes by asking relatives, friends, and neighbors if they had favorites they'd like to share. They quickly understood the type of cooks and recipes I was looking for and often suggested I call on people they knew. Sometimes I met someone at a farmer's market or church.

As I started looking farther from home, where I didn't have personal contacts, I had to get creative. I am deeply indebted to the NC Cooperative Extension Agents for Family and Consumer Education that suggested cooks in many counties. I also asked personnel in the state Welcome Centers, libraries, members of historic associations, and was fortunate to meet many people through Karen Gottovi, director of the NC Council on Aging. Locating and visiting cooks was a satisfying challenge and a wonderful adventure.

Q: How long did it take you to collect the recipes?

A: After four years of traveling, I had collected recipes in all 100 counties, but I had not called on all the folks who told me they wanted to participate. So I'm still traveling, meeting cooks, and recording recipes. (I'm sure I'm a million mile traveler in my car!) My original goal was to find one cook in every county and collect one recipe from each, but often when I arrived to visit one cook, there were lots of people there, and many shared more than one recipe. So far, I've met almost 200 cooks and documented over 600 recipes.

[more]

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3-3-3 Sweet Carolina

I think all the cooks, their stories, and their recipes are important parts of our history, so I decided not to pass up any opportunity to meet local cooks and add their contribution to the growing collection. There are many, many more traditional recipes that remain uncollected.

Q: What kinds of desserts and candies can we find in *Sweet Carolina*?

A: You'll find authentic, tried and true favorites. Almost fifty cakes are included. To top off your cakes, there are recipes for icings, fillings, or sweet sauces. Pies are just so easy to make and as popular as cakes among the North Carolinians I met. If you want portable desserts, you can try recipes for cookies, bars, and squares. If you're in the mood for puddings and custards, you'll find a variety of recipes. Cold desserts include America's favorite, vanilla ice cream, as well as flavored ice creams, sherbet, and a frozen strawberry pie. The candy recipes are all delicious and range from no cook mints to fairy kisses.

Q: Do you have a favorite recipe? Why is it your favorite one?

A: All the recipes are my favorites, but I have to admit that I associate most of them with particular seasons and enjoy them more during those times. The minute I see the canopies go up in early spring on Wake County corners, my taste buds wake up and get ready to enjoy fresh strawberries. Marie Bachelor's strawberry pizza is a tasty way to kick off the fresh fruit season.

When the magnolias pop open with huge, fragrant blooms, I bake blueberry biscuits, cake, and pie. When the crepe myrtle blossoms look like huge chunks of watermelon, I reach for Barbara Michos's open face peach pie recipe or make sour cream peach pie. During the dog days of high summer, what's better than homemade ice cream or sherbet? And you can't go wrong with a lemon pie.

In the fall, any of the apple desserts are just right. It's also a perfect season for pear pie. When the weather begins to cool off and I can get local sweet potatoes and pick up persimmons, I enjoy sweet potato and persimmon puddin'. And as the holidays approach, magic pumpkin pie, fruitcake, and apple stack cake are just right on my table.

When the hardwoods have lost their leaves and nature begins to showcase evergreens and hollies, I prefer brownie cupcakes, egg custard, nutty fingers, and shortcake cookies. During the winter, I enjoy making fudge, jet age brownies, and heavy, rich desserts—pound cakes, cheesecake, and layer cakes.

You just can't go wrong with chess pies, bread pudding, and cookies all year long.

Q: Are there any recipes that you found particularly unusual or surprising?

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4-4-4 Sweet Carolina

A: I was surprised by the number of recipes that I had never encountered before, like kanuchi, a combination of pinto beans, hominy, black walnuts, and sugar; apple stack cake made from hoe cakes flavored with molasses and covered with a delicious applesauce-like spread; green tomato pie, a recipe that dates back to the nineteenth century; a delicious and much celebrated pastry called sonker that originates in the northwest piedmont; and yummy chocolate gravy served over hot biscuits. Two cooks from different regions introduced me to black walnut cakes. Oh my goodness, you can't imagine how much fun I had discovering and sampling all the goodies!

Q: You complement many of the recipes with a story or quote from the contributor. What do these stories add to the book? Any particular favorites?

A: The cooks I met contributed personal stories and recipes that they have loved, prepared, carefully recorded, and handed down. Many of the recipes were inherited, and some families have made their recipes for so long that they can't remember where they got them. One cook purloined her chess pie recipe by eavesdropping on the party line during the 1920s! As often as possible, I use quotes from the cooks themselves to try to convey the essence of their relationships with the foods.

I consider myself a folk artist, and my medium here is a cookbook that presents the art of the storytellers as well as the culinary arts used to create the dishes. I think both are important parts of our heritage. The cooks are generous, patriotic, hard working, and strong. They can also be very funny. Their tales feed us in a different way that often connects us with each other and to our collective home. I find that biting into the finished products really is sweeter when you can envision the original recipe owners and the many beautiful places where they all live. I hope that the collection as a whole presents a nurturing story about what's right with the world. It certainly has fed me.

Q: Do these recipes require a lot of experience to make? Do you include any tips to help readers who aren't as comfortable in the kitchen?

A: *Sweet Carolina* contains recipes that range from easy to complex. Most contain fewer than ten ingredients; many take less than half an hour to prepare. For those who want challenges, there are more elaborate cakes and pies and recipes like old-fashioned butter mints.

Some chapters are introduced with what I call kitchen wisdom, either my own or some advice one of the contributing cooks offered. I hope this will aid in making dishes successfully.

Q: What can we find on your website, www.talkingcookbook.com?

A: You'll find photos of lots of the cooks and places I've visited, a summary of my quest to find a recipe from each county, sample recipes, and my email address if you have a question or recipe you'd like to share.

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5-5-5 Sweet Carolina

Q: Will there be another book of North Carolina recipes in your future?

A: I am planning books on the following:

- soups, stews, casseroles, and main dishes
- breads, spreads, jams, jellies, and juices
- vegetables and pickles
- recipes from people who've moved to North Carolina from other states
- recipes from people who've moved to North Carolina from other countries

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This interview may be reprinted in its entirety with the following credit: A conversation with Foy Allen Edelman, author of *Sweet Carolina: Favorite Desserts and Candies from the Old North State* (University of North Carolina Press, Fall 2009). The text of this interview is available at www.ibiblio.org/uncp/media/edelman_foy/.

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