

**Breaking Bread:
The Coded Language
of Southern
Cookbooks**

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"Bread, to me, should be a part of every meal.
It is so good, so satisfying." -Edna Lewis

 kitkat30



this bread tiny



yeast

Source: kitkat30

Part 1: a Search for Bread



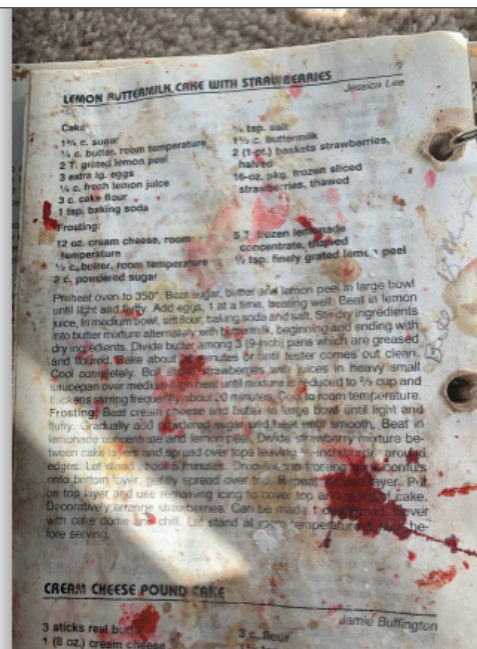
For me, bread represents a break in the cooking traditions of my mom. I've spent thousands of hours with my mom in the kitchen, watching her turn out pastries, cakes, cookies, pies, and everything in between. For a brief time when I was young, she became a freelance cake decorator of sorts to help make ends meet. But I never saw her bake a single loaf of bread.

I'm not really sure when or why I became obsessed with bread. I think my mom was disappointed, in a way, because she saw it as a rejection of the baking she tried to pass down.

No one in my mom's entire family bakes the traditional yeasted bread. They make cornbread, biscuits, pancakes, and other "simple breads". "Poor people food", my mom once called them. We bake different biscuits depending on the occasion:

- yeasted angel biscuits from my great-granny's recipe for dinner or special occasions
- buttermilk biscuits for breakfast
- tea biscuits to go with jam.

The pictures to the left are biscuits I have baked with the recipe, memorized over a decade of practice but passed down by my mom's mother.



I didn't question why nobody had learned to bake traditional yeasted bread in my family until I took a class on food history. There are lots of reasons that two-day-fermented-spelt-blend-sourdough breads are not eaten in my family. Some reasons are regional (my mom is from rural Appalachia), some are due to the time in history (baking powder more available than yeast), but the biggest reason is simply class.

Bread, particularly white fluffy bread, belonged to the upper and middle class.

Food is intricately tied to culture, and food is equally connected to class. I wanted to find out how cookbooks, particularly like the one featured here sent by my mother (the biscuit recipe is not pictured, but is from the same book) contribute to the culture of food, particularly bread, being divided by income.

Part 2: Native Breads

Gerald Taiaiake Alfred writes of the importance of cornbread in Iroquois cuisine: "But it is cornbread, Kana'tarokhón:we, the real food, that is still our traditional staple and main connection to our ancestral food ways." His recipe involves ground white corn, treated with lye, a process we now call nixtamalization, which allows vitamins such as B3 to be released and makes the corn more nutritious and easier to digest. Indigenous peoples across North and South America were treating corn with alkali solutions long before Western scientists realized the benefits of the process.

As settlers began forcing tribes out of their lands, native peoples were often forced to adapt their own culture to become more like the colonists, which meant their recipes changed as well. Traditional corn cakes began to include ingredients like flour, eggs, and sugar in the recipe, as well as extremely fine ground cornmeal. These changes in diet benefited the colonists, who almost always owned these ingredients and would trade them, shifting a traditional self-sufficient cornbread recipe to one that required trade with British colonists in order to be created.



I was unable to find a digital copy of a recipe which would reflect the indigenous tribes whose lands covered Georgia (Atlanta is currently located on Creek land). For my embodied practice for this section, I made cornbread from a book from the Smithsonian Museum, The Mitsitam Cafe.

This recipe reflects the change in diet post colonization. It's less healthy and requires Old World bread ingredients like sugar and flour, and baking powder was later added. The batter was extremely thick, sweet to taste, and it baked extremely slowly. The dominant flavor, aside from the cornmeal itself, was sugar.

My experience baking this recipe resulted in a very lumpy batter, and it baked extremely slowly at a low temperature. The bread kept fresh for a very long time; I've noticed that corn-based bread often lasts longer and molds less quickly than wheat breads.

Cornbreads, corn pone, hominy, and other corn-based breads were later the basis for the diet of most slaves. Cornbread is still plays a part in Black Southern cuisine today.



Part 3: "Dedicated to: My Friends, the Women of Atlanta, of Georgia, and the South."



Charles White, Inc., Atlanta, Ga.

MRS. S. B. DULL

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"Bread is called the Staff of Life," Dull opens her chapter on bread in her famous book "Southern Cooking", published in 1928. She tells us that all flour is separated into two categories, derived from "Spring Wheat" and "Winter Wheat", and she says that spring wheat is better for yeasted breads. At first glance, her description of flours and breads don't seem racialized, and one could imagine that Dull is writing for an audience of housewives of all races. However, on the section regarding quick breads, Dull writes: "The Southern housewife has always prided herself on the whiteness and flakiness of her biscuit", whereas "The daily use of corn breads, hominy, rice and other cereals has prevented any deficiency in our diet and offsets the general use of pastry flour."

The use of "our" signals that Dull is writing to people who she considers among her own group, a collective of women who primarily eat biscuits and bread.

The women in Dull's circle, the white women of Atlanta (including Margaret Mitchell, with whom she co-authored a cooking column), see cornbread as a necessary nutritional substitute, not something to be proud of or to serve at social gatherings. Cornbread, corn pone, and other corn cake variants have been staples of black cuisine from the era of slavery, originating from indigenous traditional recipes.

By her use of "our" and "we" and her purposeful brushing aside of cornbread-based recipes in favor of "priding herself on the whiteness...of her biscuit", Dull communicates to her audience of readers she is writing to white bakers. She also includes three separate beaten biscuit recipes, without any discussion of the connection between slavery and the labor-intensive biscuits.

Georgia Beaten Biscuit

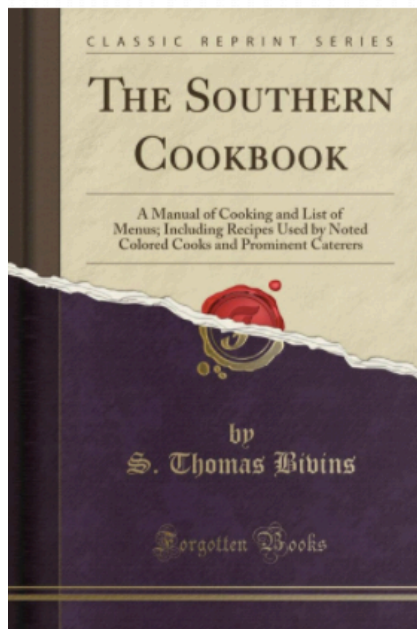
1 quart pastry flour
6 tablespoons of lard
1 teaspoon salt

1 cup of sweet milk, ice cold, more or less, to make a stiff dough

Sift salt into the flour, mix in the lard, add the sweet milk, being very careful to have the dough very stiff, even if you leave out some of the milk. Beat or grind in biscuit break for 20 minutes. Cut one-half inch thick with a small cutter made for beaten biscuit with stickers in center (or stick with a fork), bake in slow oven 20 to 40 minutes until brown and crisp.

Beaten biscuits were first made by slaves, later by black domestic workers. It's an incredibly labor intensive biscuit. When Dull includes this recipe without context, she allows her own white privilege to erase and sanitize the history of many recipes in the South.

Part 4: "The Southern Cookbook....Including Colored Cooks"



Of all the cookbooks I researched and read for this project, this one stuck out as being the most unique for its time. Although little is known about the life of S. Thomas Bivins, it's generally accepted that he was a black man who was trying to write down recipes used by other black chefs. He claims in his introduction that "the domestic, who faithfully and intelligently serves her who rocks the cradle, who is the real ruler." Throughout his introduction, Bivins drives home the same point over and over: domestic workers do valuable, essential work. By writing and publishing a collection of recipes, Bivins is also asserting the value of the work he and other Black chefs do across the country, specifically across the South.

Bivins published this book in 1912. Dull published her own book, also titled "The Southern Cookbook", sixteen years later...notably without mentioning the "colored cooks".

The recipes themselves are written in an unusual format: the ingredients are not listed in a list at the beginning of the page. Instead, many recipes are collected on a single page in a paragraph or two description of how to assemble them. This format resembles the reality of cooking and baking for someone who has been using these recipes throughout their life: they're a step by step instruction with a natural rhythm as opposed to a scientific formula. The recipes also don't include instructions for preheating or oven temperatures, which reflects the lack of oven thermostats at the time.

Most of the recipes rely on previous experience, which makes it more likely that Bivins was targeting his cookbook towards other Black chefs and bakers at the time. His "Southern Cookbook" can be read less as a strictly instructional manual (typical of most cookbooks) and more of a historical or anthropological catalogue asserting the worth and diversity of Black recipes in the South.

Benton Tea Cakes

Mix a paste of flour, a little bit of butter, and milk, roll as thin as possible, and bake on a bake-stone over the fire, or on a hot hearth.

Part 5: "Once upon a time, every housewife worth her salt baked her own bread."

Batchelder urges us to use lots of yeast because many cooks get frustrated waiting too long for the bread to rise. She instructs the reader to use "2-3 cakes of fresh yeast to one and a half cups of liquid". This is the equivalent (according to Batchelder in her "Raised Rolls" recipe) of 2-3 packets of dry active yeast. In contrast, the bread recipe NYT Cooking claims is "one of the most popular recipes The Times has ever published" requires only $\frac{1}{4}$ teaspoon of dry active yeast. 21st century breads rely on long slow fermentation. Bakers of the mid-century United States sought after a fast rising time, fast preparation, and more yield.

She also includes a section entitled, "What it Means to Me", instructing the reader to learn her own definitions for cooking terms, teaching us her own language in the kitchen.

Cooks, like sailors, need a chart. Beginners must choose simple receipts. Keep close to shore.

Raised Rolls (Ann's Favorite)

Add 2 tablespoons sugar, 1 teaspoon salt, and $\frac{1}{8}$ cup shortening to $1\frac{1}{2}$ cups scalded milk, and cool to lukewarm temperature. Soften 3 cakes fresh yeast (or 3 envelopes quick dry yeast, dissolved according to directions on package) in $\frac{1}{2}$ cup lukewarm water and let stand 5 to 10 minutes. Stir well. Add to milk. Beat 1 egg thoroughly and add.

Mix in flour to make dough that can be handled but not too stiff. Takes about 5 cups. Take out on board and knead lightly. Grease the bowl and put back the dough. Cover and set in a warm place to rise. Let rise to "twice the bulk." (That's an old bread-making cliché. It means twice what it started out to be.) Take out on board, mold, form into rolls of any desired shape, put into greased pans. Let rise again to twice the bulk, and bake in a moderately hot oven, 375° to 400° F., for about ten minutes. Brush over with melted butter. (I make these rolls up into clover leaves, Parker House, braided or knotted rolls, bread sticks, or cinnamon buns, all with equal success. The whole process requires only two to three hours.) Makes about three dozen.

Ann believes bread to be feminine, both in labor and in taste. Her recipe makes a soft, sweet, enriched bread even though she considers this to be a basic bread if in a different shape. With the amount of ingredients included and the sophisticated language of this recipe ("cliché, assuming that we know the Parker House shape), I believe Batchelder targeted this book to women, but more specifically: middle class white housewives.

Part 6: "Dear Homemaker"



Like Batchelder, this cookbook is addressed to women who care for the house, although Pillsbury chose to use the gender neutral term "homemaker"...although the book also features chapters such as "Busy Ladies Luncheon". "Elegant dishes become easy when you bake the modern way with Pillsbury's Refrigerated Convenience Products from your grocer's dairy case," the book opens. Coincidentally, the book was also put out and signed by Pillsbury itself.

The entire purpose of the cookbook is to encourage home cooks to use pre-packaged doughs for the sake of speed. Batchelder's advice of using 2-3 cakes of yeast for the sake of speed can be interpreted as a precursor to this rise of pre-packaged bread and pastry doughs. The book also stresses the idea of the appearance of wealth through food, with photos featuring baked goods on copper stands, in front of glasses brimming full of white wine and gilded tea cups.

The Pillsbury cookbook repeatedly promises "shortcuts to elegant meals", and the chapter titles of meals focus on gatherings of people rather than family meals. Examples include: "Bridge for Eight", "Teen Valentine's Party", "Sophisticate Supper", "Shower of the Hour", and "Come Over for Lasagne".

The entire cookbook feels straight out of the 1950's in its language, recipes, and style. Although saving time seems to benefit women, giving them more time to pursue a career, the chapter titles clearly imply that women are at home for lunch with fellow "busy ladies" and bridge groups. The cookbook does not seem to be targeted towards women with careers so much as women who are so busy with the tasks of the home, that any time saved is appreciated.

The book was not written as a contemporary of Batchelder. It was actually published in 1980...the year before Ronald Reagan would be elected, who ran with the slogan: "Let's Make America Great Again". This nostalgia for the past also calls back to an era when women were expected to stay home, baking, entertaining, and projecting the image of elegance and social climbing on behalf of her family.

Dear Homemaker:

Elegant dishes become easy when you bake the modern way with Pillsbury's Refrigerated convenience products from your grocer's dairy case.

We've chosen our favorite recipes from appetizers to desserts — carefully tested in our Ann Pillsbury Kitchens — with menu suggestions for your family meals or special occasions.

Part 7: "In Pursuit of Flavor"



Edna Lewis opens her chapter on bread in her book, *In Pursuit of Flavor* (1988), by describing how her family used to thresh their own wheat and grind it into flour at the mill. "It came back full of seeds and stones that had to be sifted out...but that flour really tasted of wheat berries."

She tells a story about a friend of her grandfather, who attended one of the first schools for black children after Emancipation, writing that "only the rich could afford the new, bleached out flour" required for biscuits and white bread. Lewis believes the flavor of bleached flour is inferior, despite its association with the upper class and wealth. She believed in creating her own, single-acting baking powder because she believed "double-acting baking powder has a bitter aftertaste".

"Bread, to me, should be a part of every meal. It is so good, so satisfying," she said.

Her legacy lived beyond her recipes, through the way she treated and spoke about her food. The *New York Times* published an article surrounding her legacy, arguing that she deserves more credit and a larger place of reverence in the canon of Southern chefs.

"Along the way, fried chicken has become a fraught food, somehow both universally beloved and also used in ugly stereotypes of black people. But Lewis treated all the food she prepared, perhaps all things she did, with dignity and sensitivity. You get this sense in photos of her: She always stood tall, often dressed in clothes made of African fabrics, her white hair crowning her head. Almost everyone who met her describes her as "regal.""

Her cookbooks are conversational, giving a history or commentary of each recipe, even a small personal anecdote. And unlike many other cookbooks of the time, she didn't write just for women or for housewives: she wrote for everyone who wanted to cook.



Part 8: Evoking a South that Never Existed

Few chefs share the name recognition in the South as Paula Deen. Lauren Michele Jackson, author of *White Negroes*, dissected Deen's rise and fall.

"America loves Paula Deen," she writes. "Paula became the face of Southern cuisine, though the better qualifier for her dishes is more like 'comfort food.'" She has written fifteen cookbooks, has a restaurant in Savannah, and has starred on several cooking shows, often on Food Network. Paula Deen, in many ways, became an icon of modern Southern cooking that called back to "comfort food" roots. Jackson describes Deen's food as something that "evoke[s] a cadre of emotions that non-Southerners like to pin on the South: warmth, simplicity, nostalgia, and, again, comfort."



However, starting in 2012, Paula Deen quickly fell in public imagination as scandals began to pile up. Dora Charles, a Black woman who worked in Deen's restaurant for 22 years, came forward in an interview to the *New York Times* about the way her recipes had been used by Deen for years. Paula Deen's net worth is an estimated \$16 million. Dora Charles was paid \$10 an hour.

In 2013, Deen admitted in a deposition to using the 'N word' herself on multiple occasions. In the same deposition, she described the wedding she imagined for her son, "a real plantation style wedding", including an all-black wait staff. She and her son also dressed as Lucy and Ricardo from "I Love Lucy" for Halloween in 2015...complete with her son wearing brownface.

One cannot tell the stories of recipes in the South without talking about the black chefs and bakers who had white chefs steal their intellectual and artistic property and use it for their own gain. Deen profited off the romanticization of an era built on racism, slavery, and the subjugation of millions. Jackson describes the Paula Deen-era (and, she argues the current era of Southern cooking) as a form of fetishization of the South: "another way for liberal white Americans to have the South they want (pleasant, rich, storied, flavorful) without the black and brown people who remind them of how the South came to be the South."

I was unable to find a copy of a Paula Deen cookbook in used bookstores in New Haven nor through the online collection of the Yale library, but I still wanted to include her. Her biscuit recipes online include such confident titles as: "Old Fashioned Biscuits", "Classic Biscuits", "Southern Biscuits". She framed herself as the most iconic voice of Southern food for almost a decade; her recipes are still found on the Food Network website.

Part 9: Searching for "The New South"

The term "New South" was first used in 1874, as an Atlanta newspaper urged the city to leave behind the agrarian society in favor of industrialization. Over time, the phrase came to represent a desire for economic change as well as societal shifts. However, it's hard to say when, if ever, these ideals were ever lived to completion. Jim Crow laws, lynchings, police brutality, and voter disenfranchisement (among other factors) ensured that the South remained an incredibly hostile place for minorities.

Among food writers, creators, and chefs, a new movement has been pushing for more diversity and inclusion in the past couple of decades. According to their website, the Southern Foodways Alliance is one of the players in this movement, as it "drives a more progressive future by leading conversations that challenge existing constructs, shape perspectives, and foster meaningful discussions." However, even organizations constructed with the best intentions sometimes fall short of their goals. This year, many have been calling for the founder and leader of the SFA, John T. Edge, to step down.



Many chefs have accused Edge of ignoring female and BIPOC chefs throughout the history of the organization. Asha Gomez, an Atlanta chef born in Kerala, India, gave a comment to the New York Times about the position she felt she served in SFA. "You are a prop in what felt like a dog-and-pony show," she said...We are made to feel beholden to somebody who decided to bring us to the table." Other members have given similar criticisms, calling for Edge to step down. Even those who are friends with him agree that allowing Edge to continue running SFA contributes to the erasure of voices that have traditionally been erased for the entirety of food history in the South.

Another huge player in Southern recipes and food is the magazine, "Southern Living". Since 1979, the magazine has published its own cookbook every year, and it has over 2 million subscribers. The magazine has never had a black editor in chief, and routinely presents a sanitized image of the South similar to that of Paula Deen and even the accusations of the SFA: not necessarily purposeful erasure, but a lack of inclusion.



But...What About the Sourdough?

The short answer is...there isn't any.

At least, no recipes that could be considered from the Southern United States. The "bread" that most of us picture when we go to a bakery is essentially an import to Southern food. Although white breads and enriched breads have been eaten by the upper class in the South for a couple of centuries, the vast majority of people would have been much more likely to bake biscuits, cornbread, or some variation of these two recipes.



Southern restaurants, chefs, and food writers still often fail to acknowledge the influence and intellectual history of Black and native recipes. Just as with the rest of Southern history, there's an instinct to clean or omit the violence of racism or sexism.

However, just as with any aspect of history, whether it be recipes, music, or statues: when we omit parts of the story, we are also erasing the memory and influence of those who were wronged.

Every recipe was written for someone, and by someone. It's important to remember and to talk about those whose recipes were preserved, stolen, or even forgotten. Food is a form of history shared by every person.

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