

life's little **rewards**

# The Tales Old Cookbooks Tell

By Kathy Seal

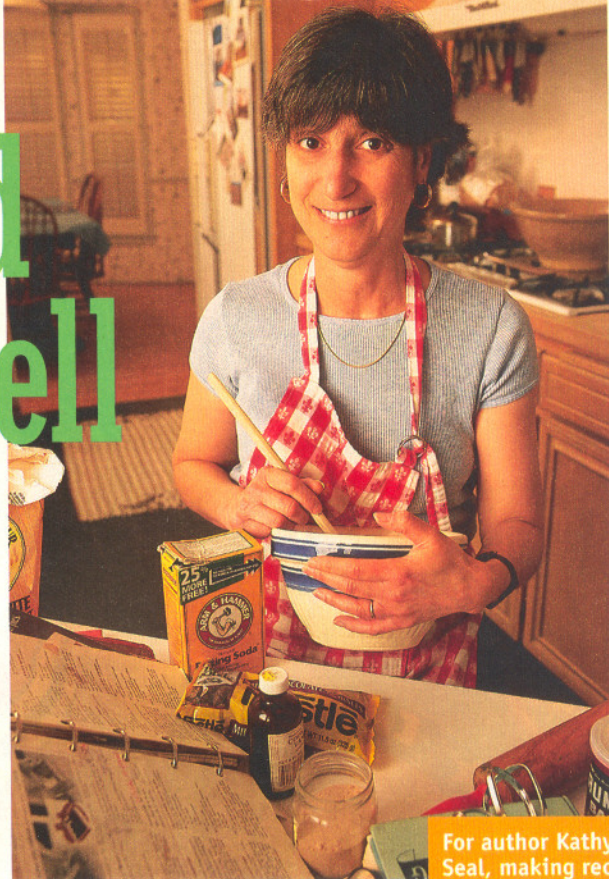
**N**ot long ago my widowed neighbor, Daphne, held a yard sale before moving closer to her son. That sunny Saturday morning, browsing through the cake tins, socket wrenches and stacks of magazines laid out carefully on card tables, I spotted *Betty Crocker's Picture Cookbook* covered in rugged red cloth with a Pennsylvania Dutch pattern of white flowers. The cookbook's loose-leaf spine was split, taped with brown adhesive, and split again. I opened the book carefully. "Corn," I learned from boldface italics, "is at its best when eaten no more than one hour after picking." I noticed scattered throughout the cookbook Daphne's notations in pale-blue ballpoint and faded pencil: "275 degrees if Pyrex," she had written. "Use 2 cups of sugar with our boysenberries," and "In 1974, I cooked a room-temperature turkey six and ¾ hours at 275 degrees."

I took the cookbook to Daphne's grown daughter, who sat behind a folding television table acting as cashier. "How much?" she asked, turning to her mother. "Fifty cents," said the straight-backed 70-year-old, whom I had often seen striding by, clad in white tennis shoes and a plaid cotton shirt, her yellow-white hair pressed down by a sun visor as she cheerfully took her daily walk.

That afternoon I lingered over the cookbook's faded pictures of pink prime rib surrounded by crispy fat, its Salad Secrets, and its recipes for Slip-Slide Custard Pie and Peanut Butter and Bacon Canapés. The scent of mildew rose from the pink-stained, stuck-together pages. "Too much salt and pepper," Daphne had written next to one recipe; "Try this," she had penciled near another. I felt guilty—as though I had bought the contents of a woman's life for only 50 cents. Why did no one in her family want to keep it?

Daphne has since moved away. But I keep her cookbook in my kitchen, next to my grandmother's *Settlement Cookbook* ("Wedding present, 1908") and my mother's recipes typed on loose-leaf paper and gathered in a small black binder. I love these crumbling cookbooks. Each yellowing page summons up these women who showed their love by cooking stuffed cabbage, schnitzel and strudel.

But these cookbooks represent something else, too. They represent the mother alive and well inside me, even



For author Kathy Seal, making recipes from old treasured cookbooks links her to loved ones.

though my sons are grown. You see, on days when work leaves me frustrated, I soothe myself by slicing onions and frying them gently until they are sweet. Or I excitedly tackle a new recipe, relying on my intuition about oil and herbs, and my skill with chicken broth and wine. For me, cooking is a creative refuge, a daily chance to give my family pleasure and to receive it in return.

On holidays I put out my mother's heavy linen tablecloth and my great-aunt's silver. In my grandmother's porcelain casserole dish, its delicate fleur-de-lis handles superglued back on, I serve the fabled macaroni and cheese of my mother-in-law, now too frail to make it herself. As our family gathers, ribbing each other and passing the gravy, I realize these meals heighten our sense of belonging. Creating each dish links me to a long line of mothers and grandmothers who, often unacknowledged, bound their families together with the ritual of food.

And in some strange way, it also links me to Daphne. When I leaf through her old cookbook,

I realize that her art and craft nurtured a family too. When Daphne cooked a turkey or doubled the amount of lemon juice in her pie, it was neither trivial nor meaningless. She was performing valuable work. I'm proud of her for that; and I'm proud of myself as well. ■

*Kathy Seal is writing a book on how to motivate children to learn, to be published by Henry Holt and Co. in 2001.*



A neighbor's cookbook holds a lifetime of memories.

Photos: Chris Corsmeier