

Living History On a Plate

Fresh ingredients meet the first American cookbook



IN SIMMERING CAST-IRON CAULDRONS, Mary Betts is cooking through the first American cookbook. Published in 1796 at 47 pages, it is no *Mastering the Art of French Cooking*, but author Amelia Simmons' stern list of ingredients (turtle, for one) has drawn Betts into a full-scale scavenger hunt through history. For example, what is pearl ash? "A close relative of baking soda," says Betts. And why does the author's "A Buttered Apple Pie" call for rose water? "It functions like vanilla," Betts explains. "We like vanilla today because it smells good and tastes good. They liked rose water for the same reasons."

While Betts records her culinary ups and downs on her blog, "Mary and Amelia," she also leads hearth-cooking workshops twice per month at Coggeshall Farm, a living history museum depicting agrarian life in Bristol in the 1790s. Using recipes from Simmons' *chef d'oeuvre*, Betts and her male counterpart, Justin Squizzero, create the workshop menu: roasted chicken, skewered and hanging in front of the fire; a bone-in pork roast; boiled potatoes and onions; freshly baked bread; rice pudding; and a milky pumpkin pie. Nearly all of the ingredients used are grown or raised on the farm; before each workshop, participants take a tour of the property, gathering eggs from the heritage chickens in their coop, pulling vegetables from the garden and bringing wood inside for the fire.

As twilight sets in, the participants prepare dinner by candlelight. In his shad belly frock coat, Squizzero describes the chicken he killed and de-feathered that morning for dinner. "Part of our mission here is to relate people to their food," he says. He spins the bird on the rope. "I know exactly which chicken this was because I killed it." A woman in a black fur coat shudders. "I like chicken, but I don't want to know that it used to be walking around," she says.

At the worktable, another participant, Rob, a beefy guy from Long Island, meticulously rolls out a piecrust while his wife, wearing a mammoth white and gold watch, quarters potatoes. Rob looks up from his work. "This is nice, just sittin' around talkin'," he says. Betts smiles. "It's kind of like a social hour, isn't it?" Rob pushes the dough out another inch.

Four hours later it is dinnertime, and Betts places the platter of perfectly roasted meats and boiled vegetables on the table. "I'm starving," says a woman from the Long Island group. As the diners take their seats, Rob asks Squizzero about his morning chores on the farm. "Are you telling me that you did all this before you started cookin'?" Squizzero confirms and Rob whistles. "No wonder everyone was skinny back then."

For more information on hearth-cooking workshops, visit www.coggeshallfarm.org.

—RACHEL CARTER