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*Dedicated to T-Bone,
until recently a good
friend of my son-in-
law and part time
rancher, Todd
Williams*



Photo by Todd Williams

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INTRODUCTION

*“When poets write about food it is usually celebratory.
Food as the thing-in-itself, but also the thoughtful
preparation of meals, the serving of meals,
meals communally shared:
a sense of the sacred in the profane.”*

Joyce Carol Oates

Introduction

THIS IS ABOUT GREAT MEALS AND THE STORIES THEY SPAWN. People who enjoy puttering around in the kitchen, trying to create interesting dishes without being slavishly imitative, create stories in the process. You've probably told one from time to time when a dinner guests asked about a dish you've served.

The story may center on an ingredient, where it comes from and what it does to enhance a dish. It may be about the preparation, and how the time in the kitchen created a special memory with family or friends. It could be about the people who join you at your table, their relationships, likes and dislikes. Or, the story may root in a past event or snippet of time that was evoked by the food or its ingredients.

To me, the stories are as important as the recipes. When dinner becomes chicken fingers eaten in the backseat or a solitary afterthought to a busy day, life is diminished. It becomes something we get through rather than a source of great memories. I hope that you take the time to leisurely enjoy these recipes in the company of good friends and family and that they help you create memories of your own.

I've tried to include in each recipe the hints, tricks and tips that lift it out of the ordinary—the things I've discovered that make the final dish not just good, but exceptional.

If you're like me, you're interested in recipes more as rough blueprints than rigid formulas. You even try to mess with recipes for baked goods, but have learned not to mess with them too much. Your cookbooks have overflowed the shelves allotted and most likely include a copy of the *Joy of Cooking* and perhaps *The Art of French Cooking* and *The Escoffier Cookbook*.

And finally, you can barely stand to read a whole recipe through. You skim it to get the high points. Then compare it with two or three others for the same dish to see the similarities. Then you want to plunge right in experimenting as you go. You want to get started now.

If I'm right so far, you might enjoy this book. In fact, you will probably enjoy changing the recipes around a little or a lot. None of the recipes in this book are in their original form—except for a few dessert recipes and bread recipes that originated with my mother. Even I do not have the courage to mess with them.

In most other instances, I invented them by combining ingredients and techniques from other recipes, developed them from scratch or borrowed liberally from friends. I've made every dish numerous times and think they are all fantastic. The most difficult thing to do was to capture the exact measurements of ingredients for recipes that I'm accustomed to preparing based on the whim of the moment. So don't feel bound by what I've written. Copy, alter, experiment and change the recipes again. If you think your version tastes better than mine, drop me a line at brian@eatgreendfw.com and let me know. I'll try yours and tell you what I think.

As you read this book, keep in mind that it's as much about the recipes as the stories evoked by those recipes when we take the time to listen.

I did and these stories are what I heard. You can skip them if you want and go straight to the recipes; but I hope you spend a few minutes with them, and I hope they stimulate you to take the time to create stories (and recipes) of your own.

NOTES



BREAKFAST

*"I went to a cafe that advertised breakfast anytime,
so I ordered French Toast during the Renaissance."*

Stephen Wright

Breakfast

MY FIRST MEMORY OF BREAKFAST IS A SOCK TIED AROUND A SPIGOT. That's what Catholics did Saturday night before going to bed back when breakfast really did break a fast that began at midnight the day before receiving Communion. The sock was to remind us to take nothing by mouth until after Sunday Mass. Gradually, fasting went the way of Latin, Gregorian chant and Extreme Unction. I still miss Gregorian chant.

But breakfast, as one of the two culinary highlights of a relaxing Sunday, still remains. Growing up, breakfasts during the week were catch-as-catch-can affairs since my father, Jack, worked various shifts and was seldom in evidence when we kids were hustling out the door for school. He was either up and had left for the day shift, on his way home from the night shift, or still in bed from the swing shift.

His default breakfast, which he usually had when we weren't around, was one soft-boiled egg and a slice of toast. That was before eggs and their cholesterol were put on the enemies list (albeit later redeemed) and he was forced to give them up, along with his daily pack of Camel cigarettes. Ours was cold cereal and a piece of homemade bread and peanut butter.

But on Sundays when we did have breakfast en masse, soft-boiled eggs were on the menu, but often, there was a platter of bacon and eggs. I always liked bacon and eggs and developed a knack for breaking the eggs in the hot grease with a gentleness that kept the yolk intact for later toast dipping. It's a practice once deemed dangerous not only because of saturated fat and cholesterol (which, it turns out, aren't as bad as we were told), but also because there's a slim chance that any bacteria that migrated through the shell might not be killed

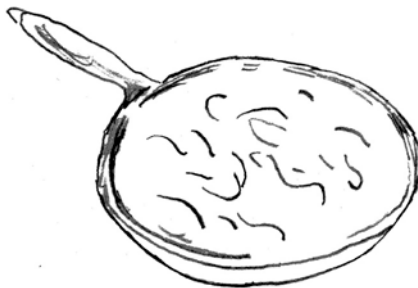
in cooking. My bet is that they will not survive the frying. So far, I've won every bet.

Breakfast launched my interest in cooking—weekend breakfasts that is.

My takeover of breakfast started with my wife, Maureen, asking me to break the eggs for her. It was a short step from that to taking over the bacon frying. Maureen's bacon-cooking technique was too disorderly for me. She filled the pan with bacon willy-nilly then cooked it, stirring and flipping the strips occasionally until they were all crisp curlicues. I preferred to lay each strip down in the pan barely touching the next one, even if it meant cooking a package of bacon in several batches.

My wife's bacon arrived at the table more quickly, but mine arrived neater—a fact that illustrates the differences on which our marriage has thrived. So, beginning with cracking the eggs, she allowed me to gradually usurp her morning role, trading cooking for additional sleep time and a more leisurely read of the Sunday morning paper. No fool, that one.

From bacon and eggs, I moved on to pancakes, blintzes, and ultimately that ultimate celebration of an egg—an omelet. All of those recipes and more are here.



PANCAKES

THE ADDITION OF PANCAKES TO MY BREAKFAST REPORTEE raised the esteem in which at least two of my children held me: Kimberly, the oldest, never liked pancakes as a child. Her tastes—at least insofar as pancakes are concerned—improved as she grew older.

I think this recipe originated from one in an old Betty Crocker cookbook that we had around the house when we were first married. The cookbook is lost, but the recipe—simple as it is—has stayed with me. On pancake mornings, I tried to get up before the rest of the house—not always easy when the youngest wanted a 5:30 am bottle—and get the batter ready.

Then, as now, pancake making can be a messy affair, particularly in the heat of battle. As much as I try to clean up as I go, when the breakfast is over, there are more mixing bowls than were necessary; more spatulas, spoons and wire whips than needed; and drops of partially cooked or hardening batter—sometimes in close proximity with sticky syrup—on most surfaces.

But the pancakes are great, so the family lives with the mess and even offers to help clean up at times. In fact, the pancakes are so good, that I used them to compensate for my ineptness in Indian lore during a period of father-daughter bonding with my daughter Carey, called Indian Princesses. This is where fathers pause each week to dress as white people think Indians do, sit cross legged on the floor and do crafts, while their daughters slowly move off to the other side of the room to play quietly among themselves.

This weekly bonding is punctuated by two or three overnight camping trips where fathers and daughters wander through the woods until boredom sets in before returning to the main

cabin where the fathers sit cross legged on the floor drinking beer while the princesses move off to the other side of the room and play quietly among themselves. Indian Guides, which is the father-son version, is much the same; but the boys are noisier. My son, Brian, and I tried that in lieu of cub scouts. As a fun experience, the Indian thing is over-rated (and now apparently politically incorrect); but I must admit, as a bonding experience, it is unequalled.

But let's return to pancakes and how they enhanced my stature. For an Indian Princess Winter overnight camp-out, I was assigned breakfast duties. Since my daughter and I weren't going to be winning any feathers for tent making or fire kindling, I decided to depart from the usual individual-cereal-servings-in-a-box breakfast and surprise my tribe-mates with something original: I pre-made pancake batter and took it along.

We were the hit of the tribe that chilly December morning. They didn't make me chief, but we both got extra feathers. And we made as much mess as I do at home, but without the mixing bowls or a reason to bother cleaning up. Here's what you will need to make about six, 6-inch pancakes.



*A young Carey Cummings
without her feathers*

Pancakes: The Recipe

For about 6 pancakes

Ingredients	Notes
1 cup of flour	
1 tablespoon of sugar	
1 teaspoon of salt	
3 teaspoons of baking powder	Don't double the baking powder if you double the recipe. Hold it to 4 teaspoons
1 cup milk (plus two tablespoons)	It's just as good with skim milk.
1 large egg	
1 tablespoon vegetable oil	
Vegetable oil for cooking	

First: Mix together the dry ingredients

Second: Whisk together, in another bowl, the wet stuff.

Third: Mix the dry ingredients into the wet ingredients with a fork. Don't beat, just mix the ingredients together. The batter should be slightly lumpy. If it's too dry – closer to dough than batter – add milk a tablespoon at a time to thin it.

Fourth: Let stand for about 30 minutes or so until bubbles form on the surface of the batter. In the meantime, heat up the griddle or fry pan to about 350 degrees F; warm the syrup and make sure the butter is soft.

Fifth: Make sure everyone's seated then liberally coat the griddle or fry pan with vegetable oil. If it smokes, it's too hot. Crank back the heat and wait a few seconds.

Sixth: Stir the batter lightly: it should be thick but still be batter. Drop a teaspoon of batter in the oil to test. If it balls up quickly and sizzles in the oil, you're ready.

Seventh: Pour about a third of a cup of batter onto the griddle or fry pan. When bubbles form on the top of the pancake and a few of them break and stay open (about four minutes), it's time to think about turning them over. Lift one up and peek under. If it's golden brown, turn them all over. Let them cook for another three minutes or so, then remove. (If you're not sure, make a small cut in the center of one of the pancakes. If you see uncooked batter, it's not done.)

And finally: Serve immediately, smallest kids first. If you're making several batches of pancakes, they will keep between towels on a warm plate in a warm oven, but they will deflate some.