

A recipe swap is still a great way to add to your collection

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Tallgrass Kitchen



(Photo: Anna Thomas Bates)

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How do people find recipes these days? Overwhelmingly, online.

A study from the Hartman Group (using in-depth interviews and a nationwide survey) found that 50% of people find recipes via social media and another 40% from blogs and other online sources. This study was done six years ago, and I'm sure the numbers haven't decreased.

While there is a wealth of culinary information at our fingertips, some of it is unreliable and untested.

I have three old recipe books from my grandmother. They are a collection of recipes, some handwritten and others carefully typed, a curated collection of her favorite salads, cakes, dips and main dishes. Most are attributed to a friend or neighbor, like Nyla's violet jelly or Mrs. Brown's hot chicken casserole.

Here's how I imagine this went down: Nyla stops over for a chat and coffee, bringing two slices of her coconut cake. My grandmother, Marguerite, loves it and asks for the recipe. Nyla hands over a handwritten copy, which my grandmother either directly inserts into her recipe collection, or rewrites/types up herself. After making it herself, she might add a few notes.

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DOUBLE BAG YOUR POINTS.

In other words, this dish was completely vetted and approved before the first time my grandmother even made it.

It's a foolproof system, and sadly, a vanishing one. I still chat with friends about recipes and share my favorites, but because my work involves seeking out, developing and testing recipes, I may have this conversation more frequently than others.



Two nights a week I wait tables at a farm-to-table restaurant in Madison called Harvest. The chef and owner, Tami Lax, has been sourcing food from local farmers and creating seasonal dishes for 18 years. Her staff, both front and back of house, are proud of the dishes they serve, and many are great home cooks themselves. And if they aren't cooks, they still appreciate a well-made dish.

Sometimes while setting up or closing, we talk about other restaurants we've gone to or dishes we've created at home. We were discussing rhubarb, and floor manager Gwynne Tyksinski began raving about her mother's rhubarb meringue dish. She was shocked that none of us had ever had anything like it.

Karleen Tyksinski is 81 years old and lives a few blocks from her daughter in Madison. Rhubarb meringue is a recipe she has been making from her own rhubarb as long as her kids can remember. When Gwynne was growing up in Chicago in the '70s, her family was part of the first wave of community gardeners, and rhubarb was included in the initial planting.

I asked Gwynne if she ever makes the recipe herself, and she laughed.

“I cook for myself, but I’m not a big baker. We all just wait for her to make it, especially since she grows the rhubarb.”

Ralph and Karleen Tyksinski still grow rhubarb, which she uses to make the family's favorite dessert, topped with meringue. (Photo: Submitted photo)



Karleen recommends doubling the recipe to use a 13-by-9-inch pan.

“I always double it. I must, for people come for seconds and it’s always delicious the next day

“Members of our family have confessed to often eating almost the entire pan. This might be an exaggeration, but they certainly have eaten half of it. It’s that good!”

Karleen also puts up her rhubarb harvest in the freezer and makes this dessert year-round. No one remembers where the original recipe came from, but the consensus is most likely a neighbor. But the Tyksinski family has made it so often, and enjoyed it so much, they have officially claimed it as their own.

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Karleen’s Rhubarb Meringue

Makes 9 servings

For the crust:

- 1 cup flour
- 1 tablespoon sugar
- Pinch of salt
- ½ cup (1 stick) cold unsalted butter, diced

For the filling:

- 3 egg yolks (reserve the whites for the meringue)
- 1 cup sugar
- 2 tablespoons flour
- ¼ teaspoon salt
- ½ cup half-and-half cream
- 2 ½ cups diced rhubarb

For the meringue:

- Pinch of cream of tartar (optional, but can help egg whites hold their shape)
- 3 egg whites
- 1/3 cup sugar
- 1 teaspoon vanilla extract

Make crust: Preheat oven to 350 degrees.

Whisk together flour, sugar and salt. Add diced butter and cut in with a pastry blender, two forks or your fingers until mixture is combined and looks like large peas. Press into 8-by-8-inch pan. Bake in preheated oven 10 to 15 minutes, until edges are just golden. Leave oven on.

Make filling: Whisk together egg yolks, sugar, flour, salt and half-and-half. Stir in rhubarb. Pour over baked crust, return to oven and bake 45 minutes, until set.

Make meringue: In a stand mixer using the whisk attachment, with an electric hand mixer or with a strong arm and a whisk, beat egg whites and cream of tartar until glossy. Add sugar slowly while continuing to beat on high speed, until stiff peaks form. Quickly stir in vanilla and spread over cooked rhubarb filling, shaping into pretty swoops and whorls.

Return to oven and bake 5 to 8 minutes, until lightly browned.

Note: The original recipe called for browning the meringue under the broiler; we found baking was easier.

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