

Recipes, With Love

by Wendy Forsyth

The smell drew me in every time. Something was always baking in my aunt's oven. Wholesome, country food. It was a popular place to go during holidays; playing tennis, swimming in their pool, hiding in the tree house until we were all called for the sumptuous afternoon teas. Homemade monte carlo biscuits, lemon shortbread, Anzac biscuits and always a cake. My favourite cake was her orange ring cake with orange icing oozing down the middle and sides. Mm mm! Licking fingers, big smiles and satisfied tummies. Childhood memories are so precious and I go back there every time I make this cake.

Orange Cake

1 whole orange (large)
200 g melted butter
3 large eggs
1 cup sugar
2 cups SR flour

Place orange in a food processor and puree. Add remaining ingredients and process until well mixed. Pour into greased, floured and lined ring tin. Bake for 40 – 50 minutes in a moderate oven. Cool on a cake rack, ice with orange icing and sprinkle with orange zest.

I remember asking my aunt, 'How do you know when it is cooked?'

Her plain answer, 'It will smell cooked.'

Betty was only four when her mother died and she soon became the lady of the house with her father and brother. She cooked from an early age and helped with lots of household chores. They still had time for tennis, riding horses and swimming in the river when they weren't busy on the farm. She went away to school and soon made lots of friends and achieved good school and excellent sporting results.

Her father eventually remarried and her world was turned upside down. She had always been his favourite girl and it was hard to be shared with another female. Eventually, meeting a handsome farmer soon turned her world right again and they married and had five children. There was lots of cooking to be done and she was always entertaining extra children from boarding school as well as all the nephews and nieces and their parents.

I was in Year 12 at home in bed with tonsillitis when Mum came in early one morning and told me that Betty and Bill's eldest had been killed. He had so much going for him, a smart, good looking young farmer. I couldn't go to his funeral as I was so sick but my parents went and my father hugged and hugged his grieving sister. I saw her soon after and I remember just hugging her. I didn't know what to say. She cried many, many tears.

'You know I just wanted to swim out into the ocean and never come back after Jack

died', she told me. I was home from my first year of teaching suffering a very bad episode of depression. She knew how I felt. She had been down in the depths of despair. She hugged me and cried with me.

"You will get better,' she assured me. She encouraged me out of the refuge of my bedroom and I sat down and had afternoon tea with her and my mother. Some lemon shortbread biscuits took me back to my childhood, carefree days of swimming and tennis and cubbies. Oh how I wished to be back there. Life seemed so simple back then, sitting in her cool kitchen munching on these biscuits with Jack.

Lemon Shortbread Biscuits

250g butter
1 cup icing sugar
Rind from 1 large lemon
2 cups plain flour

Cream butter and sugar then add flour and lemon rind. Roll into balls and press with a fork. Bake in a moderate oven for 12 – 15 minutes.

Later in life I ended up in a private clinic in Sydney with severe depression and was finally diagnosed with bipolar disorder. She would come and visit me with her friend from Gosford (some of the family had moved there after selling the farm) and she cheered me up with some monte carlo biscuits. How can something so simple make you feel so good, even if it is only for a moment? I would hide them from other patients as I didn't want to share something that was made with such love.

Some weekends I would get a leave pass from the clinic and catch the train to Gosford and spend the weekend with her and Bill. I have many main meal recipes from this time that we shared together sitting on the comfy sofa in front of the television. Often I would just stare into space and not communicate much and other times I felt chatty. She seemed to always understand my moods. I remember copying the recipes into an old exercise book or Betty would write them out for me.

This is a simple but absolutely delicious recipe from that period.

Creamy Chicken and Broccoli Casserole

- Slice two onions into rings and fry until golden and place in a greased casserole dish.
- Pull the meat from a cooked chicken into bite sized pieces and place on top of onions.
- Mix a large can of cream of chicken soup and a 600ml carton of lite cream together and pour over the top.
- Place broccoli branches over casserole and sprinkle with french fries.
- Cook in a moderate oven for about 45 minutes.

My favourite recipes were her desserts. A sweet tooth obviously ran in the family as my father just loves his desserts too. This recipe I have used often and it has always been a hit.

Peach Kuchen

Base

- 1 buttercake cake mix ½ cup toasted shredded coconut 125 g melted butter
- Mix three ingredients and press into base and sides of slab tin. Cook for 10 – 15 minutes in a moderate oven.

Filling

- 800 g peaches ¼ cup sugar ½ teaspoon cinnamon
- Arrange peach slices on pastry and sprinkle sugar and cinnamon on top.
- Topping
- 1 cup sour cream 1 egg
- Blend cream and egg together and pour over peaches. Bake in a moderate oven for 10 – 15 minutes until topping has set.

Unfortunately, over the next ten years my aunt started to lose her memory. She remembered visits to my home on a farm and my family when I saw her. She and her husband returned home to a town not far from their farm. She misses her coast friends but has plenty of relatives close by. I often think of her when I am cooking, especially when I use one of her many recipes. I wonder what it is like to not know about your life, what you have done, where you have been. How hard is it for the partners?

I received a call from my uncle. 'Next time you are down this way, can you call in and see Betty please? I would like as many people to visit her while she is still at home.' I detected from the phone call that he is beginning to feel he isn't able to manage Betty at home and that she will soon have to go to the dementia wing of the local nursing home.

I pulled up at the front of the house and smelled my uncle's roses. I took a deep breath. Glorious. I definitely needed some gardening tips from him. I nervously knocked on the front door, wondering what my aunt now looks like. I hadn't seen her for two years. Bill answered the door and invited me in. Betty was sitting on the couch watching a cooking show. She seemed older and withdrawn.

'Who is this?' she asked with panic in her voice.

'Your favourite niece, Rosie.' He was worried about my reaction but I just smiled.

'How do I know her?'

'It's OK Bill. Just let me sit and talk for a while,' I reassured him. He went off to his garden wondering if Betty would cope.

I held her hand and told her how much I loved her and how she helped me through

lots of times when I was depressed. She listened with a blank look on her face. I reminisced about childhood days of tennis, swimming and the lavish afternoon teas she would serve us. 'Bill doesn't let me cook now because I've burnt too many things. What did I cook back then?' she asked.

"Oh, you were the best cook in the district. You were always winning show prizes for your monte carlos, orange cake and lemon shortbread. By the way, you don't happen to have your recipe for monte carlos, do you? It was one you wouldn't give to anyone. A country cook's secret you used to say.' I knew I was probably asking for a miracle.

'I'll have to get Bill to look through my books. I don't know where they are.' Tears rolled down her face. 'Was I really a good cook? I just can't remember.'

I hugged her close and wiped her tears. A long silence suffocated me. I had to bite my lip hard to keep my tears at bay. I reached into my bag and pulled out a small container of monte carlo biscuits that I had made. 'Would you like one of my monte carlos?' I asked tentatively.

'Oh, yes please.'

She took a bite and then another and gradually her face lit up. 'I do remember making these!' She opened the biscuit up and smelt inside. Something wasn't quite right. I knew by the way she paused and tasted carefully. 'You need to use raspberry jam. Not strawberry. It gives a better taste.'

Was I given the recipe? Not yet. But every time I visit her in hospital, I take some monte carlos, always slightly different to the time before. The other patients in her wing gather around for one too and always give me the thumbs up.

I always wonder if she thinks, "What would they know?"

I wait, patiently, for her verdict. I still haven't quite got it right, even with raspberry jam, but when I do, it will be a recipe, with love, I will treasure forever.