

If anyone leafs through one of my cookbooks, she has no trouble picking out the recipes I use frequently. The spatters and smudges on the pages tell the story. One volume, though, looks like new. Well, not like new, either, because it is bound in a burgundy material very leather-like, if not actual leather. The lettering and the edges of the pages are gold, and a little burgundy satin bookmark protrudes from between the pages—in other words, a far cry from my usual tattered paperbacks.

In 1996 a facsimile of the original Fanny Farmer Cookbook came out in commemoration of that famous book's centennial. I bought a copy of this tribute to the famous cookbook that had been brought out by the Boston Cooking School in 1896. I have never used the book, though I do rely on the Fanny Farmer Baking book of much more recent vintage.

In looking for another book on a shelf that houses my less frequently consulted cookbooks, I came across this reprint of the original Fanny Farmer volume, and I have spent some time looking through it, reading recipes and other advice for the late 19th century cook.

None of today's cookbooks with which I am familiar heads a section with a sentence like this: "Before starting to build a fire, free the grate from ashes." The paragraph goes on to instruct the cook in making a fire with both wood and coal in such a way as to get the most out of the heat of the fuel.

Many recipes in the book, though, sound perfectly acceptable with methods used by most cooks today. This was a thoroughly modern and somewhat scientific book of instruction in 1896. There was none of the old "lump of butter the size of an egg" terminology of earlier recipes. Most of the dishes could be made with ingredients available today, following the rules just as they were written. One exception, though, relates to cooking vegetables. We boil or steam most vegetables for a much shorter time these days than they did in the late 19th century. Overcooked vegetables were the order of the day. Fanny Farmer recommended that spinach be boiled for 25 to 30 minutes, asparagus 20 to 30 minutes, and peas 20 to 60 minutes. It is no wonder that vegetables were not popular with the people of that era.

In looking through the recipes, I naturally found myself perusing the baking instructions. Many of the desserts that we find enjoyable today were also favorites of our ancestors. The cookies called hermits were no different from those I often bake these days. The jelly roll recipe was also completely familiar.

One chapter in the book—located after the recipes—was devoted to advice to the young housekeeper. Among other things, she is reminded: "To keep an Ice Chest in good condition, wash thoroughly once a week with cold or lukewarm water in which washing soda has been dissolved. If by chance anything is spilt in an ice chest, it should be wiped off at once."

The final chapter in the 1894 Fanny Farmer Cook Book gave the course of instruction at the Boston Cooking School. One three and a half hour lesson a week was the practice, with eight students making a full class. After each lesson, the food was served to the students. Twelve lessons cost twelve dollars, with three dollars extra for materials. Lesson one involved making the

following: making a fire, coffee, mixing water bread, tomato soup, croutons, boiled potatoes, and mutton chops. For the last lesson the students made: roast or fricassee chicken, rice with cheese, creamed turnips, white corn cake, plain lobster, French dressing, custard soufflé, and creamy sauce.

There was a second course of instruction for “richer” dishes. Twelve lessons for this series cost a little more—fifteen dollars, plus three for materials. The final lesson in this course taught the aspiring cooks to make: puff paste, oyster patties, raspberry tarts, creamed oysters, lobster salad, mayonnaise dressing, salted almonds, and ice cream or sherbet.

An even costlier set of sessions taught the pupils to cook dinners. Special lessons were also available, as well as instruction in laundry work, and cooking for the sick.

I like old cookbooks, and the traditional instructions, not seen in the 1896 Fanny Farmer book, such as “an oven hot enough to brown good white writing paper in 30 seconds,” are part of the charm of the nineteenth century kitchen. Recipes written in rhyme, like my grandmother’s friedcake recipe that begins: “Two eggs beaten, fine as silk; a cup of sugar, a cup of milk.....” and the old practice of boiling eggs or cooking other dishes for the length of time it took to sing a certain song or recite a particular poem—these things indicate to me the high degree of competence shown by these cooks. Reliance on written recipes and buzzer timers might be steps in the wrong direction?