

Searching through cookbooks and recipe collections is probably more prevalent during holiday seasons when many of us are drawn to the old recipes that are traditional in our families in celebrating festive occasions. The cookies that appear only at Christmas, or the special potato dish that is always on the menu for Easter, or the chocolate confection that marks St. Valentine's Day—these kinds of family specialties are often carried on for generations, sometimes because they are truly loved, but sometimes just because they have become traditional.

I remember reading the story of the little girl who asked her mother why they cut the end from the ham before baking it. Remarkably, four generations of women in that family were in the kitchen that day. The girl's mother told her that Grandma—her mother—always did that. And, on this occasion, Grandma's mother—the great-grandmother of the child who asked the question, was also in attendance.

“Well,” Grandma replied. “Mom always did that. I expect that it had something to do with flavor.” She looked at her mother as she struggled to explain. “Why do we do that?” she finally asked.

The great-grandmother laughed. “Well,” she answered, chuckling, “I don't know why you all have been cutting the end off the ham. I did it because my roasting pan wasn't big enough.”

So, what we bake or cook in the kitchen around the holidays may have as much to do with tradition as with enjoyment or taste.

I always bake my mother's applesauce fruitcake sometime between Thanksgiving and Christmas. Some people in our family do not like fruitcake at all, and I admit that I have changed the recipe a little to suit my own taste. My mother always used candied fruit peels in the cake—similar to most fruitcake recipes—and I abandoned that ingredient years ago in favor of just dried cherries, dates, raisins, and walnuts. The candied fruit peels are more suited, I think, to the recipe we use for a bar cookie.

Swedish pepparkakor are also a necessity at Christmas time. These ultra thin, very gingery cookies are good anytime, not just during holidays, and I often bake a batch at other times of the year, too. But, we absolutely must have them during the Christmas season.

Looking through the little red box of 3”X5” cards, I found several recipes that fell into one of two categories: delicious or traditional. Some of the delicious dishes were also traditional, and many of the traditional foods were also delicious, but there were some that fell into only one of these categories. Rice Krispie treats are delicious, but definitely are not traditional. Lutefisk, a Scandinavian tradition, is something that I actually like, but a lot of other Swedes and Norwegians I know dislike lutefisk intensely. Yet, they eat it at Christmas time. The rice pudding we always ate on New Year's Eve is traditional, but it is a matter of discussion whether it is delicious or not.

I came across that rice pudding recipe today. We always just referred to it as “Swede Rice.” My mother started by measuring white rice into a kettle, covering it with water, and cooking until the rice took up the liquid. Then, she began adding milk, cooking slowly as the rice grew tender and the ingredients

thickened. She then added a cinnamon stick, some raisins, and sugar. After more cooking, she poured the thick rice pudding onto dinner plates, or sometimes, for the children, she used smaller plates. And then we added the non-Scandinavian element to this dish. We all poured generous amounts of maple syrup over the plates of rice pudding.

Some people in the family are very fond of Swede Rice. I am not one of them. But, I eat it every New Year's Eve—because, it is a tradition. And traditions have a way of joining the past and present in our families in a way that is both comforting and significant. The past, present, and future of a family can often be traced by the foods they serve and eat at holiday times. So, even if we just do something because “Grandma did it this way,” that says something about the value we place on family. It is worth eating a plate of Swede Rice once a year, even if it isn't my favorite.