

After trying out new-to-me recipes from around the world every day during the month of January, it might seem boring to go back to the old standbys when the month ended. That wasn't not what happened, though. Once the international culinary trip was finished for the year, I had a real desire to get out the stained, dog-eared old cookbooks and recipe cards and return to the familiarity of the family recipes that have endured through generations.

That is why I made a batch of dough for rolled-out molasses cookies last night. And this morning I took a big spoonful of that glossy tan mixture from the refrigerator, sprinkled a little flour on the cherrywood countertop, and rolled out enough dough for a pan of cookies to have with our Sunday morning coffee.

I baked these almost exactly as my mother would have done, sprinkling a bit of sugar on the tops and pressing a raisin into the center of each cookie. I didn't bother to get out a cookie cutter, though. I just rolled out the dough, cut it in irregular rectangles, and filled the cookie sheet. I will make a better job of it when I bake the rest of the dough, but this pan of fresh, warm, gingery molasses cookies did not need the formality of shape to accompany our coffee.

These old family recipes are simple in regard to ingredients. Most farm families didn't have the fancy ingredients that a lot of baked goods and dinner combinations require now. What they did usually have, in abundance during times of plenty, at least, was a good supply of eggs, milk, cream, buttermilk, butter, and lard. Flour and sugar were almost always on hand, and molasses was a sweetener and flavor additive that is unappreciated by many cooks today. Vanilla and lemon extract were the most prevalent flavorings. Most cooks had raisins on hand, and cinnamon, nutmeg, cloves, and ginger were in the cupboards.

I think my favorite family recipe that has been handed down for at least four generations is for friedcakes. I have quoted this so many times: "Two eggs beaten fine as silk/ A cup of sugar, a cup of milk/Then add flour just enough/ Not too much or they'll be tough. There are a few other ingredients, but listing them does not begin to convey the deliciousness of these friedcakes when they are warm from the kettle, shaken in a paper bag with a little granulated or maple sugar. My mother's childhood neighbor, Anna, would hold one of these fresh friedcakes and wait for the chickadees to come to the bird feeder and eat from her hand.

I never developed a taste for the sour cream sugar cookies that were also a traditional family recipe. My taste has always been more in harmony with foods with a lot of color—white bread holds no charm for me, either.

A classmate of my brother's said once that no matter how terrible a cook someone's mother was, her cooking was still the best in the world to her children. I don't know if that is true or not, but my mother's baking and cooking renown extended beyond the family, and her anticipated pies were sold out from every bake sale before it opened its doors. So, I guess she was a pretty good cook.

I have dough rising now for kamut/einkorn flat bread, but I think I have time to eat that last cookie on the plate.