

Reflecting on Familiar Tastes: Lessons Found in Making Chow

Diane Tye

My mother speaks to me through her green tomato chow; through the scrawl of her handwritten recipe, through the sting of juice on my fingers as I dice into tiny pieces one green tomato after another in an endless pile, through the pungent smell that fills the house as pickles boil on the stove, and through the familiar sour sweet taste that makes the food on my plate more lively. These distinctive sights, textures and smells immediately transport me back through time to the fall days of my childhood when the activities of Mom's pickling structured our days and pickle smells filled the house with the cozy reassuring smell of home. The taste is a powerful resurrection of other meals shared with people who now live only in my memory: my mother, grandparents and a whole cast of relatives who populated the world of my childhood. Pickles connect me to my mother, and through her to earlier generations of women, for as Janet Theophano observes, "women formally constructed their matrilineal genealogies and their relationships to one another in their cookbooks, binding together the different generations" (2002:86).

My mother's pickles bear the imprint of earlier generations and I am reminded of Benay Blend's words: "To remember a recipe is to honor the woman it comes from, how it was passed on to her, and where she situates herself within a culinary female lineage that defies patriarchal notions of genealogy" (2001:46-47). Her recipe for green tomato chow whose reproduction I witnessed every autumn during my childhood goes back through women in my family, from me, my mother Laurene, grandmother Bell to great-grandmother Ida. Each generational rendition of the recipe bears the stamp of one of these women and her time. Mom began making chow a year or two after her marriage to my father in 1954 and for over thirty years it was an integral part of her autumn work. Now well-worn and discolored from use and time, the recipe is one of several she learned from her mother. It helped mark her transition into wifehood and she turned to it every year. My grandmother's recipe has her mother's name, "Mother G.," scrawled on the bottom and I can imagine that she, like my mother, got it from her mother shortly after she married. Today these women exist only in memory, glimpsed in a photograph, a familiar saying, a piece of handiwork or in green tomato chow. This recipe, as Miriam Meyers claims is often true for food, is my "bridge to keep women across generations from being strangers" (2001:105).

In the tastes and smells of chow I find reminders of my family's deep connections to rural Nova Scotia. The women who made this recipe before me were never far from their agricultural roots. In summer they grew vegetables and made jam from berries they picked; their autumns were busy with pickle making. Clothing was homemade, not purchased, and like most things in the household it found a second life as a hooked mat or quilt. Nothing was thrown away. Even green tomatoes, sometimes the less perfect fruit on the vine or those that were slow to ripen, were valued. Chow is my mother's lasting reminder to look for the value in the everyday and the unremarkable.

Pickles were seen by my mother and grandmother as a necessary part of women's work. Just as hanging out the clothes brings me closer to other women across place and time, pickle making connects me to the larger legacy of women's work. It is returned to anew each year and afresh in each generation. The tastes and smells of these pickles remind me that I come from a line of "great workers." When I as a child to be a good worker was a high complement; to be a "great worker" was superlative praise. The women in my family wore this label proudly. Chow was part of this unending work for my mother and her mother before her, just as was making the meals that it accompanied. Paul Christianson, when thinking back to his childhood, can never remember mother being idle. Nor can I recall my mother still. She privileged work over all else. Children were secondary to tasks that had to be accomplished; we were fit around the work. Sometimes we helped but more often we stayed out of the way.

Well made pickles were one product of her hard work. I remember the speed with which my mother's fingers flew when she accomplished a task. She taught me that a good worker does not dally. She stays focused. My mother also showed me that a good worker cares about her work. I remember her insistence that I cut the tomatoes finely when I helped with the chow and these instructions are now inscribed on her recipe. "Anything worth doing is worth doing right," I can hear her say. One must appreciate the pleasures of work and work done well. There is beauty in a row of colorful jars of jams and pickles lining a basement shelf, the shine of a freshly washed floor; the look and smell of clothes hanging on a line.

My mother, as well as her mother and grandmother before her, devoted countless hours to church work. They supported the choir, Sunday School, youth and women's groups and as church women, they helped organize the church suppers that sustained congregations. Dishes of chow often dotted the long rows of tables, lined with paper tablecloths, on which would be served plates of roast turkey or ham and scalloped potatoes. Bottles of green tomato chow were also a staple of "pantry tables," the collection of baked goods, preserves and handiwork sold at fundraisers from church suppers and teas to rummage sales.

I remember when I learned near the end of her life that my mother really didn't like to cook. I realize now the fact that she spent so much of her time in the kitchen speaks loudly of her notions of how a good wife and mother should be. My mother made chow out of a sense of duty and of a responsibility for others. Marjorie DeVault notes that much of women's work is tied to caring (1994:87); this part of my mother's performance of femininity fits into a long legacy of female nurturing. It now brings back memories of how my mother cared for us and how I learned early on that preparing food for other people is what a good mother does. Green tomato chow was my father's favorite. He ate it with almost every meal and Mom made it especially for him. My mother's food was a gift that helped to sustain us; it offered us tastes we enjoyed to alleviate boredom and provide comfort. I remember how I was nurtured and I also reflect on the gendered ways I express my caring for others. Like all relationships, mother-daughter dynamics shift overtime. The taste of chow is a snapshot I carry of my mother but it is a selectively reproduced memory of her from the uncomplicated years of my childhood. I also remember the last time we made green tomato chow together. I was in my twenties and she sat beside

me on the back step, too ill to help but able to watch and offer occasional instruction. "Keep the pieces small," I can hear her insist. It was the last gift I gave to my mother.

Making chow is a reminder to me of passing time. Its production is part of an annual cycle. I discover that neither my mother nor grandmother had many recipes in their collections that were passed down. Those that were tended to be seasonal recipes, tied to preserving or festive celebrations like birthdays or Christmas. As I cut up tomatoes and onions, as I boil sugar and vinegar on the stove, and as the smell of pickling spices pervades the house, I experience the passing of seasons with all my senses. In an annual stocktaking, I realize how quickly years pass. Where has time gone since my mother died? How long has it been since I last helped her make fall pickles? Through the taste of her chow Mom reminds me that life is short and passes quickly. It was as if she moved at lightning speed because she knew that didn't have much time and that her life would end when she was only in her fifties. The tangy taste of autumn pickles prods me forward. None of us have much time. Like Miriam Meyers, I find food to be a most powerful vehicle for memory. Meyer writes of her mother, "In the decade since her death, I feel closest to my mother when I sit down before a meal I know she would enjoy. It's communion" (2001:2). For me, the taste of chow is always bitter sweet.

As a folklorist, I have been taught to think of family culture lovingly handed down through generations but this is not the case for recipes in my family. Many of my mother's recipes were ones she learned from her friends and then passed on to my grandmother. Green tomato chow is one of the few recipes that have been passed down generationally, from mother to daughter. At the same time, the recipe reflects elements of generational change and modernity in women's lives. As I look at my grandmother's recipe, I see ways in which her life was different from her mother's. Positioned at the edge of literacy, her directions such as "Put spice in bag," are caught somewhere between speech and written expression, capturing a moment in time when cooking was passed on orally or demonstrated. I'm also surprised to see that my mother's recipe calls for half as much pickling spice as my grandmother's. Reflecting changing tastes, my mother must have altered the recipe to produce a sweeter tasting product. In her life as a minister's wife sociability was accompanied by a cup or tea and something sweet: iced squares and creamy desserts on a graham wafer base. While they stayed true to their rural values, each woman experienced life changes that took her away from her mother. Chow has become part of my symbolic understanding of how women in the family have helped prepare their daughters. They passed on recipes selectively providing the next generation with resources for running a household and living a life but not in ways that tied them to tastes and traditions of the past. These tools are meant to be used and shaped in new ways to meet the demands of each new generation.

Change is not only inevitable, it is important. Even as symbols of stability and continuity, recipes can speak of change. I now recall the heavy spicy taste of Gram Gillespie's chow and its dark green colour and I realize how it differed from my mother's. I discover that this taste that represents continuity for me has not been running through the family for generations. Only my memory of the taste is constant.

When my mother and grandmother produced chow, it was meant for everyday use. Baked beans or mashed potatoes and fish were two of many bland meals always accompanied by chow. In truth it no longer complements many of the foods I eat; Asian or Middle Eastern dishes don't seem to call for its taste. For me this is a comfort food. My bottles of green tomato chow are treated much more respectfully than those of earlier generations, shared with my father and used sparingly at special occasions like Christmas when family come together. Because as Margaret Visser writes, "a taste acquired is rarely lost; and tastes and smells which we have known in the past recall for us, as nothing else can, the memories associated with them" (1991:36-37), the familiar taste of my mother's green tomato chow, together with its sight and smell, embodies who she was, and by extension tells me who I am.

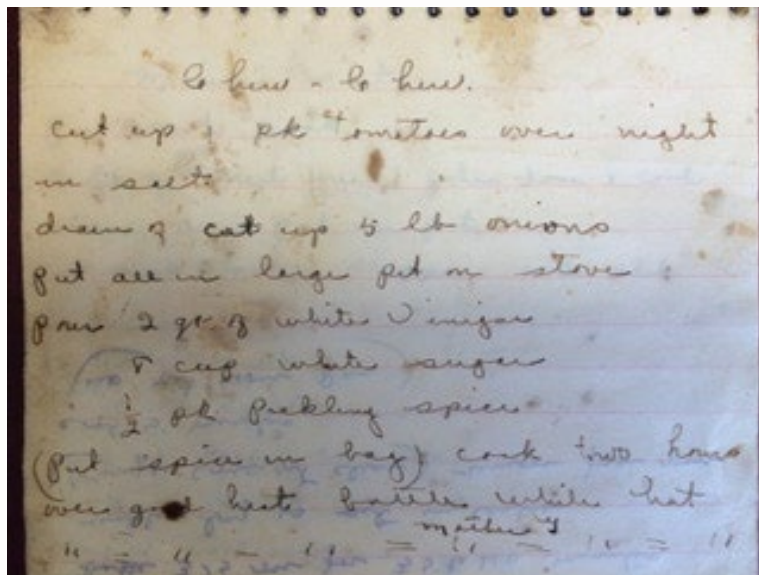


Photo 1: My grandmother's recipe for Chow-chow.



Photo 2: My mother's recipe for Chow-chow.

References Cited

- Blend, Benay. 2001. "I am an Act of Kneading": Food and the Making of Chicana Identity. In *Cooking Lessons. The Politics of Gender and Food*, ed. Sherrie A. Inness, 41-61. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield.
- Christensen, Paul. 2001. The Cup of Comfort. In *Cooking Lessons. The Politics of Gender and Food*, ed. Sherrie A. Inness, 1-17. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers,
- DeVault, Majorie L. 1994. *Feeding the Family. The Social Organization of Caring as Gendered Work*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Meyers, Miriam. 2001. *A Bite off Mama's Plate. Mothers' and Daughters' Connections through Food*. Westport, Conn: Bergin & Garvey.
- Theophano, Janet. 2002. *Eat My Words. Reading Women's Lives through the Cookbooks They Wrote*. New York: Palgrave.
- Tye, Henry. 2005. Interview with author. August 20.
- Visser, Margaret. 1991. *The Rituals of Dinner*. Toronto: Harper Collins.