

Menu Cards and Green Gravy

by Sara McWilliams

Several years ago, my sister was at a community meeting. As she and another attendee introduced themselves to each other, they learned that they had grown up in the same neighborhood 60 miles away. Suddenly the woman said "Wait! I know who you are. I was friends with your little sister. Your mother had those menu cards." Mother did indeed. It's no surprise they became the stuff of legends.

My parents were engaged in 1940. In those days, most prospective brides knew they had signed up for planning and cooking meals. My mother did not like to cook. Others in that same situation might have settled on 5 or 10 sure-fire dishes, mastered them, and treated their families to years of Meatloaf Mondays and pancakes [cooked by Dad] on Saturday mornings.

My mother's approach was different. She gathered menus from all over - cookbooks, elegant women's magazines, neighborhood and church newsletters, free shopper's guides, friends, newspaper food sections. If you had a menu, she wanted it.

And what an assortment she gathered. Breakfasts designed to fuel up a farm team or advance a particular weight loss plan. Sophisticated brunches, ladies' lunches and afternoon teas, family suppers and company dinners. Ethnic feasts and Ways to Feed a Family on \$2 in 20 minutes.

She copied each menu onto a 3x5 file card.

From the very start, Mother planned to cook breakfast and dinner. She anticipated that leftovers and peanut butter sandwiches would do for lunch. Consequently, all menus in this remarkably eclectic collection were either breakfast or dinner. Spring luncheon with asparagus? Dinner Watercress sandwiches and Russian Tea? Ditto. Smorgasbord? Obviously, dinner. Caramel cornflake ring? Breakfast. You get the idea.

With organization complete, there must have been enough dinner menus to last 4 or 5 months, with a smaller number for breakfast. Beginning with her first meal as a bride and continuing until her last child went to college, Mother rotated through the menu cards every day of every week of every year.

What's for dinner? Check out the card on top of the stack. Stop in the kitchen to preview breakfast before going to bed.

We had some strange meals. In the 1950's and 60's, neighborhood grocery stores carried few of the ingredients called for in more esoteric menus. Because - in addition not liking to cook, Mother refused to learn to drive - my father did the grocery shopping on his way home from work. I'm guessing that he and the guy behind the meat counter often puzzled together over a grocery list item.

Occasionally and unpredictably, weird items were available. The Scrambled Eggs with Calf Brains listed on the breakfast card could, to my distress, be just that in the morning. We loved it when Daddy would say "Sorry, Dorothy, no sweetbreads" as he carried grocery bags in one hand and his briefcase in the other.

As a salesman, my father often treated clients to lunch. The days when instead he grabbed a packet of crackers for lunch on the go invariably landed on a tea sandwich dinner. Daddy would lead us in grace, serve us each from the sandwich platter, thank my mother for the meal, then get up and return with peanut butter and real sandwich bread for the table.

It only made sense that my siblings and I would review the card before asking a classmate to dinner. Close friends knew to double check before accepting an invitation. Some of these meals were dangerous.

My mother, however, had full confidence in her system. She always welcomed dinner guests and applied that old adage "treat your guests like family". This could mean daring them to eat what was set before them.

When I was in college, my new boyfriend came for the weekend. Astoundingly, the dinner menu called for roast beef and potatoes. "There is a god", I thought.

As my mother was finishing the gravy - and indeed her gravy was good - I offered to bring her Kitchen Bouquet seasoning. This was always her finishing touch. I was glad that it would correct the green color produced by the addition of spinach stock to the cooking liquid. "Nope", Mother replied. " My guests will eat what I serve them". Apparently testing the new guy had been added to the menu.

She had met her match. Boyfriend was never one to rise to a bait. If you threw down a gauntlet, he'd smile and step on it as he walked away. Plus, he liked gravy. So, when offered, he requested two servings. One on his beef and one on his potatoes. Ate every bite. Told my mother it was delicious. No comment on the green color which, were it included in the Crayola 64 box, would have been christened seasick.

Secretly Mother loved this. At breakfast the next morning, she asked him how he'd like his eggs.