

Famous South Tahoe chocolate cake lives on

By Kathryn Reed

Some of the best cookbooks are ones that practically read like a novel because they tell stories that weave food into our everyday lives. Others offer so many tips that they eliminate the need for some other “how to” books. Some are compilations and not just the recipes of one chef.

“Favorite Recipes from the South Tahoe Garden Club” is a little bit of all of those types of cookbooks.

And while it doesn't have the stories per se, the ads, ingredients and advice are insights into Lake Tahoe in 1969 – the year the book was published. The cookbooks were a moneymaker for the club.



Lake Tahoe News Publisher Kathryn Reed celebrates her birthday with an Ethel Clarke chocolate cake made by Susan Wood. Photo/Susan Wood

Some of the businesses that advertised are still here. Some are just memories.

One of the funniest ads is for Tahoe Valley Pharmacy. It says, "If your experimental recipe does not work, come see us."

The book has tips for high altitude cooking and gardening. All sorts of different conversions are in it – like how 2 pounds of fresh peaches will become 1 quart when canned.

What to do with leftovers, ideas for kids' lunches, what to grill, suggestions for losing weight and the nutritional value of foods are all part of the cookbook.

While the cookbook is comprehensive, it's not very big – 128 pages. But the type in places is super small.

Tucked into this cookbook is a recipe made famous by Ethel Clarke. She was notorious for delivering her famous chocolate cakes to houses when there was a birthday.

"I have never tasted so much chocolate in my life," Del Laine said. With six kids in the Laine family, they were well stocked with cakes every year.

Clarke never sold a cake for profit, but plenty of money was made off of her baking skills. That's how people became familiar with her chocolate cake. She would bring them to different bazaars. Sometimes they were sold by the slice, other times the whole cake was purchased.

"The chocolate cake was a treasure. It was made with real butter. It was so moist," recalls Brenda Stewart.

With all of her civic involvement, there were plenty of opportunities for cake making. Clarke was secretary of the Lake Valley Community Club, organizer-president of the American Legion Auxiliary, charter president of Soroptimist International of South Lake Tahoe, first secretary of South Tahoe Public Utility District, board member of Lake Tahoe Community Concerts, charter member of Lake Tahoe Historical Society, and member (chair for five years) of the South Tahoe

City-School Recreation Commission. (Plus she owned the first insurance agency and built the first local office building in South Lake Tahoe.)

Clarke died in 1987, but her recipe lives on. It was part of a birthday celebration last weekend.

Chocolate Cake by Ethel Clarke

Cream 1 cube of butter. Add $1\frac{1}{2}$ cups of sugar; beat. Add 4 egg yolks; beat. Add 2 squares of Baker's unsweetened chocolate melted over hot water – beat. Have ready $2\frac{1}{4}$ cups of flour (sifted 3 times). Into $1\frac{1}{2}$ cups of buttermilk stir $1\frac{1}{4}$ teaspoons of soda.

When buttermilk is well mixed with soda, add $\frac{1}{2}$ to batter. Next, add one half of the flour, then the balance of buttermilk and balance of flour. Add 2 teaspoons of vanilla and fold in 4 stiffly beaten egg whites. Bake at 325 degrees for 35 minutes.

Batter should be very stiff, makes 3 round or 2 large square layers.

Ice with:

1 cube butter

milk to moisten

2 tsp vanilla

1 package powdered sugar

2 squares Baker's unsweetened chocolate melted over hot water

Do not use a butter substitutes – will not work.