Feature on book *To Great Grandmother’s House We Go*

Tom Kelchner

441 N. Hanover St.

Carlisle, Pa 17013

Phone: 717 440 2534

Email: ThomasKelchner27@gmail.com

Web site: PaFoodLife.com

New Cookbook Preserves Quakertown Woman’s

Lifetime of Recipes

Joan Knechel of Quakertown wanted to write a cookbook for much of her life. It was only after her passing in 2014 that her family discovered the vast trove of 1,400 recipes that she’d accumulated for the book that never got written.

Joan was an awesome cook by everyone’s reconning. First, she’d been a mom and raised five kids. She had been a partner in a restaurant for two years – BJ’s Steak and Crab in Emmaus. And she had been a meat cutter in Food Fair market in Quakertown. She was a diner waitress and, though it wasn’t called that, she ran a boarding house for a brother, sons, nieces and their assorted friends for many years.

In later years, when her family went “over the river and through the woods” for Thanksgiving, it was to her house they went.

Her son-in-law, retired journalist Tom Kelchner of Carlisle, has published Joan’s cookbook at last: *To Great Grandmother’s House We Go: American comfort food from the 1970s, 60s and before.*

He described the discovery that was the genesis of the idea: “We were having coffee one morning several years after Joan passed away and Linda was thinking about baking a cake. She said ‘I wonder if we have mom’s recipe.’

“We looked in the large box of Joan’s notebooks, file card boxes and charity cookbooks that ended up in the attic after the ‘cleanout’ that followed Joan’s passing. There were hundreds of recipes! Eventually we found 14 notebooks, more than a dozen charity cookbooks and three file card boxes. One of the boxes had belonged to Joan’s grandmother Suzanna Rothenberger (1875-1950). It was passed down to Joan’s mother Florence (1914-1988), who added to it, and then left it to Joan.

“We listed all the recipes that Linda could remember Joan making – there were 70! Linda thought of those just off the top of her head in just two hours!” Tom said.

“When we dug into the file-card boxes and notebooks, just seeing the recipes jogged her memory. We talked to Linda’s brothers and they remembered a lot. Eventually we ended up putting 140 in the final list.

“We started cooking them and photographing the resulting dishes and the recipe cards. And we started researching where these Pennsylvania Dutch and American comfort food recipes came from.

“It took almost two years to kitchen test them, write them in a consistent recipe format, photograph and EAT them,” he said.

“And of course, there were great memories for Linda and her brothers when we turned up a bunch of recipes that nobody had seen for years like Buweschenkel, Corn and Shrimp Chowder and Spaghetti Pizza Style.

“There were some really interesting historic recipes in there too: Apies cake, War Cake from 1918 and a recipe that Joan called “Greek Chili.” Chili isn’t really a traditional Greek dish but in the 1920s two brothers from Macedonia invented ‘Cincinnati five-way chili’ and the seasonings in Joan’s recipe looks very much like descriptions that we have of that. Possibly she got it from one of the diners where she worked that was owned by a Greek family. Could it have originally come from the chili house next to the Paradise Burlesque in Cincinnati where it all started? It is an intriguing possibility.

“I grew up in Berwick in Columbia County. My ancestors were mostly Pennsylvania Dutch, but there were a number of recipes that Joan made all the time that I’d never heard of,” Tom said.

“My mother and grandmother made chicken corn soup with rivels, hog maw, shoo fly pie, shoo fly cake, pot pie and dandelion with hot bacon dressing but I never heard of some of the Dutch recipes that Linda grew up eating.

“There was Apies cake, which apparently came from Switzerland about 300 years ago. That’s traceable to the town of Bally not far from Quakertown. Lin’s grandmother and aunts made those by the dozens. We have a picture in the book of Joan’s great granddaughter Jaylin Gartner putting pans of them in the oven. She loves them.

“It took three tries to get the recipe for German potato filling right. We had the basic recipe, but Linda knew all the things Joan did to it that weren’t written down. As it turns out, the filling is pretty common even here in south central Pennsylvania but I don’t remember it.

“And the buweschenkel brought back wonderful memories for Linda. When she was little, Joan took her to visit her grandfather and the couple he lived with: Elsie and Kaley, in Bechtelsville. Elsie always made the ‘fil’t noodles.’ They’re like huge perogies as big as a dinner plate, filled with mashed potatoes and browned in butter. Those were strange to me. They’re still popular in Quakertown. There’s a bakery in the Q-Mart called Bova Haüs, that sells them.

“Joan’s tastes were pretty firmly set in the years before about 1970. Although she collected recipes her whole life, up to 2014, they were all what are commonly described as ‘comfort food.’

“I think most people would consider her recipes out-of-date, not historic, just old junk at this point. I wanted to document them. It was such a well-organized and preserved archive -- one really good data point in the history of American home cooking. We can look back at newspapers and magazines from those years and see what recipes were circulating, but Joan’s collection documents what one woman choose from that universe. In addition to the recipes, we have the living memory of Linda and her brothers. This is a food historian’s dream come true.”

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