



Lifestyle

Cape Cod food: South Yarmouth woman shares Depression-era recipes with a twist

By Gwenn Friss

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Karen DeFuria Ryan of South Yarmouth, says she posted recipes on Facebook for several Depression-era cakes and breads that did not require butter, eggs or yeast, which were sometimes in short supply last spring during the early days of the new coronavirus pandemic.

South Yarmouth resident Karen DeFuria Ryan is an avid cook with a degree in nutrition and an impressive collection of recipes — often older creations with a healthier or unusual take on classic dishes.

“Recently, I decided to share publicly my lifetime baking recipes collected from generations of home bakers. I created a series of Facebook posts under the business page name “Social Techie.” I was looking for my own way of giving back to the community,” Ryan emailed, after she started writing the posts in late spring.

While a normal post for her social media business drew a “few hundred glances,” Ryan wrote, the first four recipes garnered a reach of 5,600 with more than 500 engagements in the first few weeks.

Ryan says she posted recipes for several Depression-era cakes and breads that did not require butter, eggs or yeast, which were sometimes in short supply last spring during the early days of the new coronavirus pandemic. She also posted an egg casserole for those who stocked up on eggs. “I just figured if they had them, what were they doing with them?” she laughs.

“I couldn’t help thinking that the comfort food nature and limitation to a few key ingredients made them more interesting during COVID-19 times,” Ryan wrote in her email.

In a telephone interview from her home office, Ryan says she was born into a culture of good food.

“I was fortunate enough to grow up in a house in Somerville where my grandparents also lived,” she says. “They were from Northern Italy and came here as a young married couple. My nonna taught us things like mushroom picking. We would go into the Medford woods. My grandmother had a calendar and she would mark rainy days so she would know when to go.”

After a basket was filled, taking care to stay away from poisonous mushrooms (Ryan’s grandmother learned from the town pharmacist in Italy to spot the dangerous ones), the crew would “go into processing mode,” cooking some and dehydrating others.

But as a kid, Ryan didn’t like mushrooms. “I never did taste those mushrooms we worked so hard to gather,” she says. “I wish I could go back in time and taste one.”

Good cooking traveled in the bloodline.

“I feel very spoiled that my mother was a great Italian cook and made everything from scratch,” Ryan says.

One of Ryan’s first jobs was working as a cook in a retirement community where residents shared cooking tips and recipes with her. It was the foundation of her 100-recipe collection, many of which feature plant-based Depression-era workarounds.

She still makes an unusual Irish bread recipe from her Aunt Doris and remembers the lesson that came with it.

“The very first time I made that recipe, I had to call her for advice. I thought it was 350 degrees for 40 minutes. When I realized my mistake, I turned the oven up, then called her and asked ‘what now?’ She said ‘How should I know? Next time, use the directions.’”

Ryan lives — and cooks with — her husband, Mark, and younger son, 18-year-old Alex, who just graduated from Dennis-Yarmouth Regional High School as she did. The couple's older son, Shane, 21, is in the Marines.

Ryan says she is always interested in sharing recipes — especially older, out-of-print ones. She invites people to email her at socialdiner1@gmail.com

“I make a personal effort to help these recipes live on,” she says. “I’m the type of person who loves yard sales. If I see a recipe box, I know there’s gold in there.”

DORIS GOLDING'S IRISH BREAD

(Handed down from the Boston Irish)

Mix wet ingredients and sugar together:

1 stick melted butter

1 beaten egg

2 cups buttermilk (may substitute plain yogurt)

1/2 cup sugar

Mix dry ingredients together:

3 cups flour

1 cup finely ground oatmeal

1/2 teaspoon salt

2 teaspoons baking soda

Oil a round, heavy 8- or 9-inch baking dish.

Quickly mix wet and dry ingredients; do not over-mix.

Fold in *1 cup raisins or currants*.

Bake in a preheated 425-degree oven for 40 minutes.