

Recipe for memories

Make your own cookbook—and gain a family heirloom in the process. **By Sheryl Berk**

Our families first met over meatballs. The day after my husband, Peter, and I got engaged four years ago, we arranged a get-together at a boisterous Italian restaurant and asked our parents, siblings, and grandparents to celebrate the occasion with us.

I was understandably nervous about making the introductions: How do you tell total strangers they're becoming one big happy family? What if they had nothing in common? What if they didn't even

lightly breads them with a delicate tomato sauce, then serves them atop a nest of spaghetti. "That sounds delicious," said my future mother-in-law, Barbara Berk. "You must give me the recipe."

Which gave me a great idea: Why not ask *both* our families for recipes and combine them into a joint Kahn-Berk family cookbook? It would be something we could all share and contribute to—and

(Top, left to right) Barbara Berk, Judy Kahn, Nancy Saperstone, Emily Saperstone, Sheryl Berk, Peggy Berk, and "Mama Chickie" Binder

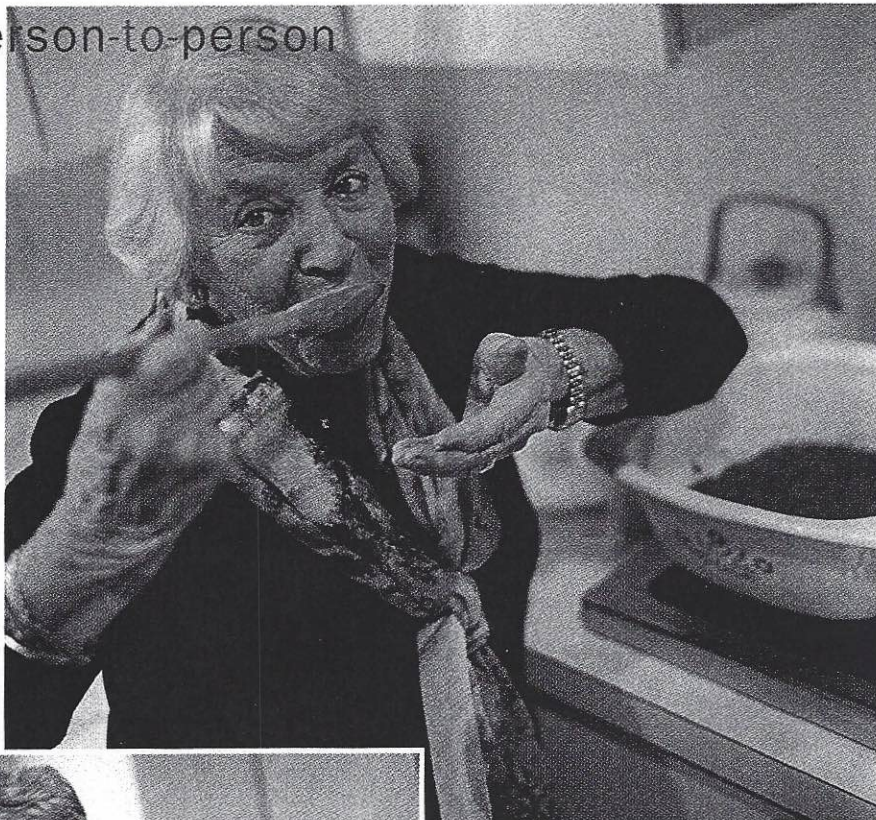
like each other? I was hoping for the best and was relieved when, between passing plates of penne and garlic bread, Peter's mom and mine struck up a lively conversation about wedding dates, engagement announcements, and oh yes, the art of veal marinara.

My mother, Judy, slices her veal cutlets paper thin and

certainly enjoy. I'll admit that at first my motives weren't entirely selfless: As a wife-to-be, I was eager to learn our families' culinary secrets so I could reproduce them in my future home. As Peter and I registered for pots, pans, china, and silver, all I could think of was how our table would look when I served juicy turkey, tart cranberry sauce, and fragrant corn bread stuffing—just like my mom always makes.

I began by asking Mom about my Grandma Miriam's recipe for stuffed cabbage—always a favorite at Hanukkah. The main ingredients—chopped meat, crushed tomatoes, and large cabbage leaves—were easy enough to guess. But when we came to Miriam's secret for the delectable sweet-and-sour sauce, I pressed my mom for details: "How much

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sister-in-law Peggy in response to my call for recipes. Her Baked Brie with Walnuts and Brandy has the distinction of being a "welcome to the family" dish. "When I met Aunt Jane Berk in California for the first time, she made it [for me], and we talked as we dipped bread in the warm cheese," she explained. "It was so delicious, I begged her to tell me how to make it." Beneath the ingredients on the card, Peggy added a personal note that I included in the cookbook: "From one sister-in-law to another," she wrote. "Enjoy!"

The more I asked, the more recipes came pouring in by phone, fax, mail, and E-mail. And each one, I soon discovered, was as unique and special as the person who gave it to me. Even my three-year-old niece Emily—who loves helping her mother (Peter's sister Nancy) decorate butter cookies with sprinkles and colored sugar—wanted to share a

recipe of her own. "I make bagel and cream cheese," she bragged. "First, you put your finger in the cream cheese, then you smush it on the bagel. . . ."

I treasured hearing—and tasting—our families' histories and traditions. I used a cooking software program to enter them into my computer, then printed out copies and placed them in binders, which I mailed out to everyone who contributed. Now I update the recipes every month, filing them under sections labeled "Meat," "Poultry," "Fish," "Sides," "Sweets," "Foreign Dishes," and "Holiday Favorites." I've also added family photos and illustrations. The title, I think, says it all: "Let's Dish!: Our Family Cookbook."

My mother-in-law is perhaps the most creative cook in our clan and the most enthusiastic supporter of my project. Always on the lookout for new and unusual dishes, she derives many of her best recipes from vacations she and my father-in-law, Alan, have taken abroad. A cruise to Greece, for example, yielded a recipe for lamb chops seasoned with



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lemon? How much sugar?" She thought hard for a few minutes. "You know, your grandma never really did measure things. She'd say, 'A *bissel* of this, a *bissel* of that.'" (In Yiddish, *bissel* means "a little" or "a dash," and Miriam often cooked by instinct rather than by specific measurement.) "The best way to tell if it's right is to keep tasting it," my mother instructed. So I did, making sure it was sweet yet had a bit of a kick to it. My mom also told me how Grandma would work all

day on her cabbage until it was perfect, stirring it in a huge pot on the stove and letting it simmer for several hours, until the entire hallway of her Washington Heights apartment building was filled with the aroma.

One recipe, one family memory done.

A week later, I opened the mailbox to find a letter and recipe card from my

person-to-person

Mediterranean spices. Barbara is also a whiz at whipping up meals that are both healthy and flavorful. Her Rolled Chicken Supreme, she proudly told me, is a Berk original. She wraps a chicken breast around banana slices, sautés it lightly, then cooks it in a light white-wine sauce with assorted fruit. "Anything and everything will work in it," she insists. At different times, she's used grapes, peaches, pineapple—even crab apples. One rainy weeknight—rather than brave a rainstorm to get to the supermarket—I made it with canned apricots and pears. When I shared the story, she said, "See? That's your very own version. Everyone who makes it gets to add a little bit of herself to the mix."

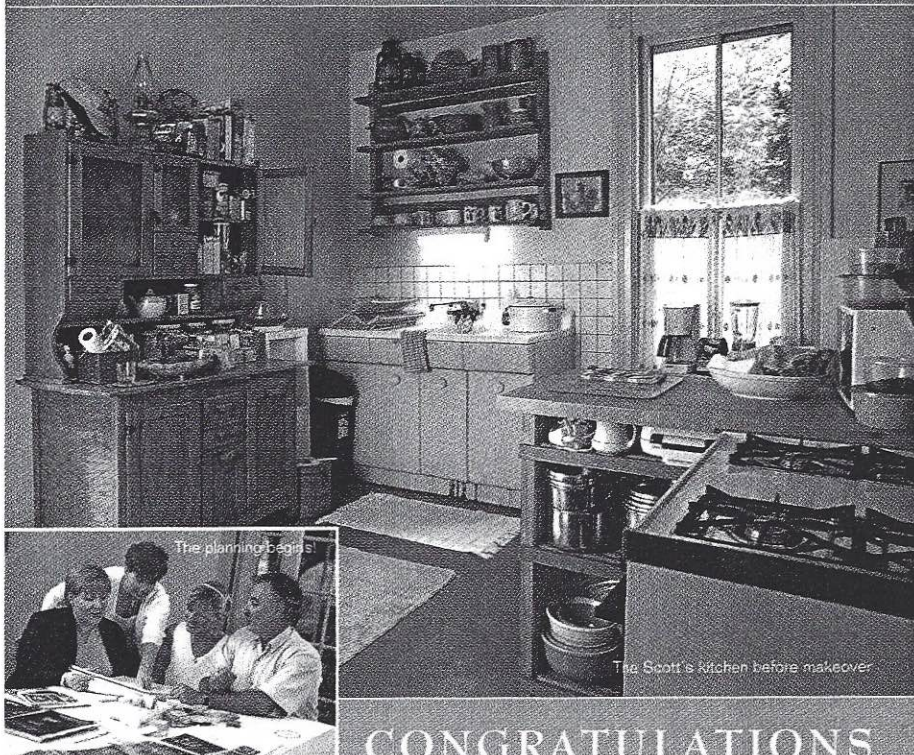
Mama Chickie, Peter's grandmother, makes certain that an anecdote is always an ingredient in her recipes. As she dictates the how-tos, she includes a tale about the person who liked the dish, or some memory of making it 20, 40, or even 60 years ago. Papa Nat (her late husband and Peter's grandfather) could not resist her Cabbage Soup or Tongue with Raisins and Gingersnaps. And she tells me when Peter was a boy, he always asked her to make Chocolate Mousse Pie for his birthday. She even has a photo of him at age six with a chocolate mustache, enjoying every bite.

The culmination of our hard work comes during the holidays. I ask everyone to pick out a dish from our cookbook—preferably one they've never tried before—and bring it to dinner at my in-laws' in Greenwich, Connecticut. (I'm partial to Chickie's Sweet Potato and Marshmallow Soufflé.) As the pages and the years go by, I've realized that we'll be able to hand down this cookbook for generations to come, and that all of these wonderful meals—and the people who make them—will be remembered and cherished. Now, as Peter and I approach our fourth anniversary, our families know each other well and enjoy being together. I would like to think my cookbook had something to do with that, and I plan on filling binder after binder, year after year. We all have so much to learn from each other—and not just in the kitchen. ♡

Sberyl Berk is senior entertainment editor at Biography magazine.

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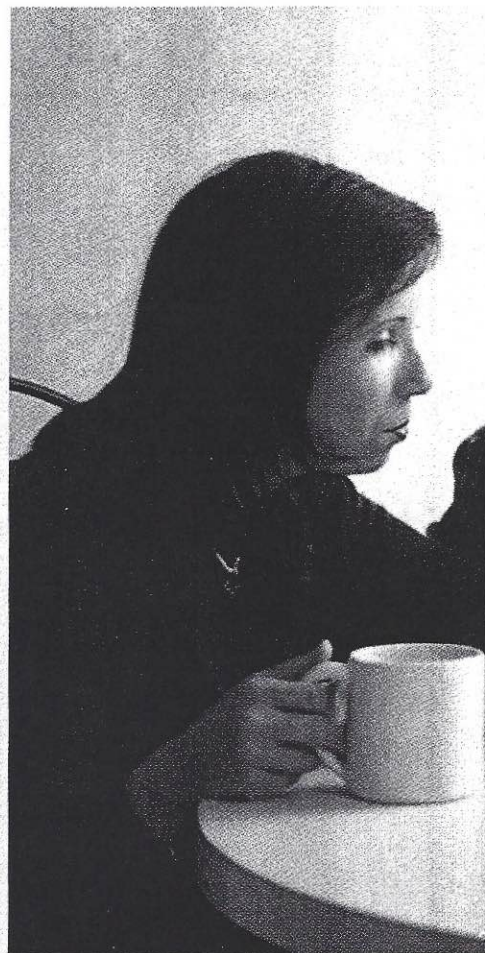
Create Your Own Family Cookbook

Use these tips to put together your own family culinary treasure.

- Spread the word. Call, write, or e-mail family members, requesting their favorite recipes.
- Include anecdotes with each recipe entry. Ask the cooks to reflect on why a dish is a family favorite—who loves it, who handed it down—and to indicate if it's served at a specific holiday or time of year. The more they elaborate, the better.
- Use a recipe software application, such as Home Cookin (www.mountain-software.com/homecook.htm), MasterCook (www.mastercook.com), or Meal-Master (home1.gte.net/welliver) to format your cookbook. These programs have easy-to-follow templates that make inputting recipes a breeze. They also let you print out grocery lists and import text from

E-mails or disks; depending on the application, you can also import or export recipes from one program to another.

- Personalize your cookbook with family photos and illustrations. Some Web sites (such as www.clipartconnection.com) have free food-related drawings that you can download and import into your recipe files. Or ask a young family member to draw pictures of his or her favorite foods.
- Place recipes in an inexpensive presentation binder that has plastic (i.e., spill-proof) pages. Color-code the categories (red pages for meat, blue for fish, yellow for chicken, etc.), or use stick-on tabs to clearly label and divide each section.
- Send a cookbook to each family household, and mail new pages once a month or as often as you receive recipes. Aim for at least one new recipe a month.



Tuesday

*A GREAT EVENING CAN SOMETIMES
TAKE UP TO FIVE YEARS TO PERFECT.*

Harvest :

*Finally, the sleepless nights
waiting for the precise moment
to harvest are all worthwhile.*

