

The Consummate Cook

Kibbitzing, teaching and writing—all part of Marilyn Harris's kitchen

By Carol Lloyd

Marilyn Harris, Cincinnati's gastronomic guru, had good reason to accost two University of Cincinnati freshmen at the Clifton IGA. The charge: transporting non-nutritive substances across grocery aisles. Following a list and adding each item on their calculator, the young men kept crossing her path. When they tossed a box of Hamburger Helper on their already mix-laden cart, the Culinary Cop sprang into action.

"You absolutely cannot do this," she told the dumbstruck two as she snatched away the offending package. "It's too expensive and you can make much better yourselves. Now, exactly how much do you have to spend?" There followed a lecture (note-taking required) on preparing a ground beef, tomato sauce and oregano casserole. "Your mother will buy you a grater," she told them, flinging back the prepared cheese sprinkle. She refrained, barely, from insisting on fresh parsley. Minutes later, pulling alongside them as they gazed longingly at the frozen pot pies, she hissed, "Don't even think of it. And don't try to put anything back on the shelf. I'm going to follow you out just to make sure."

Although she hasn't seen them since, she hopes they learned their lesson. Teaching is second nature to the Mississippi-born Harris, who feels called upon to offer advice and suggestions at all times. The other day, in a long bank line, she overheard the tellers commiserating about their diet's tasteless cottage cheese. "Put salsa on it. You'll love it, and it's very low in calories," Marilyn piped up. "Or try some low calorie mayonnaise mixed in," she said, oblivious to stares.

For nine years, she presided as cooking instructor and director of L.S. Ayres's cooking school and coordinator of its Fourth Street Market, a perfect forum. "Here I was on the main floor of

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a downtown department store, talking to the world. I got to know the bag ladies and the bank execs during those

days," she says. Her cooking student became proteges and personal friends. "I knew everything about them—their

husbands, their kids, where they went for vacation. I got to see their wardrobes for each season.”

When, after so many happy years, Ayres closed, she was of two minds. She missed her students, but “this was probably the best thing that has ever happened to me.” A year later, she has become a culinary conglomerate. In addition to her twice-weekly radio show, Marilyn has completed her first cookbook, begun a television series on WCET, and launched a weekly column

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in the Food section of the *Enquirer*.

Cooking with Marilyn, her cookbook, is intended for a wide audience—for anyone, in fact, who enjoys good food. “I don’t want to intimidate people. I want them to learn some techniques, but I also want them to loosen up a bit and be creative in the kitchen,” says Harris.

Cooking with Marilyn features menus with such titles as Ladies’ Lunch, Gentlemen’s Lunch, Be a Guest at Your Own Cocktail Party, Southern Suppers and Bountiful Breakfasts. The recipes range from down-home “comfort-food” such as Southern sticky biscuits to more elegant offerings, such as her pork pate. Practical tips are served up along with just enough anecdotes to lighten. Aiming for both novice cooks and more experienced chefs tired of the same old recipes, Marilyn emphasizes freshness and ease of preparation. “None of the menus require that you own your own papaya farm, she promises.

She believes that cooking can be fun, a notion affirmed on her WCKY radio cooking show. Her ability to convey knowledge and her excitement about creating good food set her apart from the run of the food processor cook. The show’s lively interaction with listeners showcases her quick wit.

Along with meaty questions about all things culinary, she gets her share of esoteric requests—such as what transparent pie is and how to dye popcorn red, white and blue for July 4th. Marilyn relishes hints from her listeners, remembering the caller who always put a shower cap over the smoke detector when she used the broiler.

A strong advocate for fresh ingredients, Marilyn pulls few punches on the air. WCKY host Joyce Wise recently offered her own chicken recipe calling for a can of crushed pineapple, a jar of apricot preserves, a jar of orange French dressing and a package of onion soup mix. “Mix it all together,” Joyce told the audience, “and bake it at 350 for one hour.”

“And then,” Marilyn cut in, “take it out and throw it in the garbage.”

Food long has been a consuming interest for Marilyn. Having grown up among traditional Southern cooks, she obtained a food and nutrition degree from Mississippi State College for Women. She’s studied in Paris, Lyon and London with such haute chefs as Paul Bocuse and Pierre Troisgros.

Born in the same Tupelo, Mississippi, hospital as Elvis, she has spent chunks of time in Natchez, New Orleans and Germany. But Cincinnati is home. Marilyn serves on the Cincinnati Ballet board of trustees and the Opera Guild and sprinkles her stories with names of local personalities.

Harris savors variety in people as well as in food. “I lead a wonderful life with all my university friends (husband E.P. is a professor of Germanic Language and Literature at UC), all my crazy retail friends and my cooking students,” she says.

Leafing through a hand-bound guest book made by an old friend from Germany, she reminisces about some of the fetes and several of the houseguests at Hotel Harris, people who intended to spend the night, but ended up, like the man who came to dinner, staying three months.

And who could blame them? The food is delectable, the conversation engaging, the ambience soothing. Her guests probably sense, as her viewers and listeners do, that for Marilyn, people are the prime ingredient. As much as she enjoys creating new combinations, changing recipes to suit the occasion, and setting a visually pleasing table, her greatest pleasure comes from the people for whom she cooks. Unlike Babbette, in *Babbette’s Feast*, who prepares a munificent banquet but is satisfied to remain in the kitchen while her friends eat, Marilyn would not want to be anywhere else but in the center of the party. □



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