



A Cookbook from the Heart, Written for the Soul

Unless you are Julia Child or Giada de Laurentis — both very experienced food pros — writing a cookbook is an epic challenge. You probably ask yourself a dozen questions before you write a proposal and sign a contract. Would you have an audience? Can you write well? What do you know about food? And, most importantly, can you cook?

And what if your cookbook is not only about cooking but also about another primary focus in your life — your Catholic faith? Plenty of cookbooks do combine food and faith. My book features that, certainly, but also offers another

inspiring focus: the lives, cultures, and foods of the saints.

Thanks to Fr. Edward Hathaway, former pastor of St. Veronica Catholic Church in Virginia, several of us launched a series of cooking classes about seven years ago called “Cooking with our Saints.” Taking place in the parish kitchen, each class featured a different country, its patron saint, and a speaker from that country to talk about food and faith. Of course, many countries do have a large Catholic population, so finding speakers was not difficult. But sometimes, it was! Imagine calling the embassy of a very Catholic western European country

and having the media office say that Catholics no longer live there. That was a surprise, as you might imagine.

The most inspirational speaker was a Catholic from Cambodia, a country that has suffered severe persecutions, poverty, and political turmoil. It’s also a country that is officially Theravada Buddhist. A former native of Siem Reap, who escaped during the Khmer Rouge period, willingly talked about her Catholic faith. Her former church, St. John Catholic Church in the village of Siem Reap, is sited near the famous temple Angkor Wat.

What I and the rest of the students

in our parish classes learned about, besides the diversity of cultures, was the astonishing types of food and recipes local peoples cook and eat. No, we did not serve Thai water bugs nor live Chinese “dancing prawns”... but we did serve a variety of interesting and unusual foods — at least to us — such as Scottish haggis (the filling, not the lung) and Goan spicy mango salad.

And when Fernando Flores, a fellow parishioner, joined the group and became one of its co-leaders, the classes got a little more complex

FAITH IN FOOD *cont.* pg 24

Pastéis de Nata — Egg Custard Pies

The original recipe for Pastéis de Nata was invented — and kept secret — several hundred years ago in the convent at the Mosteiro dos Jerónimos in Portugal. At the time, nuns used egg whites to starch clothes, such as habits, and the yolks were saved to make sweets and pastries. After the Revolution of 1820, most of the Portugal’s convents and monasteries were closed.

Around 1837, in order to raise money to save the Jerónimos monastery, clerics set up Casa Pastéis de Belém, the first shop to sell the pastéis. Their dessert is called Pastéis de Belém, and their original secret recipe is still heavily guarded. Here is a similar, non-secret Pastéis de Nata recipe we made during one of our classes.

- 1 (17-ounce) package frozen puff pastry
- 6 egg yolks, lightly beaten
- 3/4 cup sugar
- Pinch salt
- 1 teaspoon vanilla extract
- 1 1/2 cups heavy cream
- 3 tablespoons cornstarch
- Confectioners’ sugar, optional
- Ground cinnamon, optional



Preheat the oven to 350 degrees. Lightly grease and line 12 half-cup muffin cups with the thawed pastry, cut into squares to fit.

In a mixing bowl, whisk the egg yolks, sugar, and salt until mixture is pale yellow, smooth, and thick. In a separate bowl, whisk a small amount of the cream into the cornstarch until smooth. Add the remaining cream and whisk to combine. Add the cream mixture to the egg mixture, whisking until the sugar is completely dissolved. Divide the mixture among the muffin cups, about 2 tablespoons per cup.

Bake until the custard is set around the edges but still slightly jiggly in the center, about 20 minutes. Remove from the oven and allow to cool to room temperature before serving. Sprinkle with confectioners’ sugar and cinnamon before serving, if desired. Makes 16.

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