

Talking With My Mouth Full: Crab Cakes, Bundt Cakes, and Other Kitchen Stories

Bonny Wolf. Foreword by Scott Turow

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Talking With My Mouth Full offers a quick tour of regional American cooking. Each topic is torn open just enough for a peek and a whiff, from popovers to paella, plum preserve, pasties, poppy-seed cake, pizza, spicy pecans, and perfect pie crust. And that's just the P's. But this isn't merely a recipe book. It's a book about how food imprints places and events on us: "My son's bar mitzvah was cold Russian chicken with walnuts" (p.5).

NPR commentator Bonny Wolf pins the beginning of food snobbery on the demise of the Bundt pan, and she's having none of it. Her recipes are homespun, clear, and matter-of-fact: "Cover the top and sides of the cake with the rest of the icing. Push the icing that runs onto the plate back onto the cake" (p.214). Some of her advice seems like dares in disguise. She urges us to wrap a whole fish in newspaper, tie it with kitchen string, "then run the whole

on the barbecue rack, and cook for about a half hour on each side, or 15 minutes for each inch of thickness. The paper doesn't burn but does give the fish a nice smoky flavor. I don't know why" (p.206).

Wolf casts an impish eye on many cuisines ("Texans drink three things with food: tea, beer, or Dr. Pepper" [p.188]). However, she writes most richly about the East Coast, especially Smith Island, where the dialect is Elizabethan and their yellow cake has ten layers. We smell the produce in Capitol Hill's Eastern Market stalls (since 1873!), and we munch alongside her: "You need to put on a brave face for your first soft-shell sandwich. What you have is a bun with some crustacean legs hanging out the sides. It gets easier every time" (p.210).

All of the recipes and anecdotes served here are delightfully satisfying, including those for Coddies, Berger cookies, Eva's Dewberry Pie, Snowballs, Jenifer's Grandfather's Schaum Torte, and Hopple Popple. No, I'm not telling what that last one is. You'll have to read the book.

—Jennifer Judkins, University of California, Los Angeles