

How to Cook Like a Jewish Grandmother

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By Marla Brooks



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This book is dedicated to the owners of Slobod's Delicatessens, my grandparents Henry and Lena Slobod and my cousins Jack and Aldean Slobod. Even though they aren't here anymore to cook those delicious meals I used to love as a child, they left behind a legacy of love, an appreciation of family, and hundreds of terrific recipes to remember them by.



Grandma and Grandpa



Jack and Aldean Slobod.

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INTRODUCTION

Our approach to cooking and eating has changed a great deal in recent years. We've become a more health-conscious society and try to eat right. It's grown increasingly difficult to process all the dietary data we're fed on a regular basis because we seem to be continually inundated with helpful information that will allow us to live well into our golden years. While seemingly overwhelming, trying to keep current is nothing new. Nearly a century ago, people were just as perplexed as we are today. The preface to *The Universal Cookbook*, written in 1913 by Helen Cramp, reads: "The lively and intense interest now displayed everywhere in the art of cookery, which is at once the most ancient and the most modern of arts, marks such an advance over the



Slobod's Delicatessen.

pioneer days of domestic science as only a teacher of that subject, or an experienced housekeeper who has kept step with the march of progress, can fully appreciate.”

Let’s face it. Cooking trends come and go, and it’s nearly impossible to keep up. We live, we learn and, in spite of it all, we eat. Sure, it’s in our best interest to try and maintain a healthy lifestyle but by forcing ourselves to eat right, we develop that all-too-common ailment: Comfort Food Deprivation. There’s probably not a person alive who doesn’t salivate at the recollection of a favorite childhood meal. Because we savor those childhood memories, family recipes handed down from generation to generation change very little over the years. We dream of feasting on food where taste, not caloric intake, is what counts.

One of the most important things to remember when using this book is that you don’t have to be a Jewish grandmother to cook like one. In my opinion, the one word that defines any grandmother’s cooking is “love.” But in the case of a Jewish grandmother, love and food are synonymous. Nothing pleases a Jewish grandmother more than watching her family sit down to a wonderfully prepared meal and eating until they are ready to bust. In her mind, seeing the family pushing themselves away from the table barely able to move is a nonverbal confirmation of their love and devotion to her. Of course, this is a Jewish grandmother, and that’s not quite enough: Several minutes later, after she’s cleared the table and the family has slowly made their way to the sofa, loosened any clothing that is constricting their waistline, and are struggling to sit upright, she will sail into the room with a huge tray of fresh fruit and cookies. *Oy vey!*

Having been raised by my grandmother, Lena Slobod, I had many opportunities to watch her prepare a variety of wonderful meals. She never used a recipe or wrote anything down. I was well into my teens before I realized that a lot of people actually used cookbooks. There were one or two in the house, but seemingly they were there just for show. *The Universal Cookbook* must’ve been a wedding gift because, rather than being an integral part of her domestic life, Grandma called it a “dust catcher.” In her way of cooking, it was always a pinch of this and a handful of that.

Shortly after her marriage to Henry in 1919, Lena was a housewife in Kansas City, Missouri, with a husband and two young children to feed. Then in 1937 the family uprooted themselves to join Henry’s older brother, Harry, and his family in Philadelphia. Harry Slobod, or “Pop,” as everyone called him, ran Slobod’s Delicatessen at 46th and Walnut Streets. Harry had lots of takeout foods and a few tables for sit-down dining. Pop always boasted the biggest corned beef and pastrami sandwiches around, and the store was packed from 6 A.M. to midnight. Henry followed in his big brother’s footsteps



Mom outside the family store in 1941.

and decided to try his luck with Slobod's, a grocery store and deli at 5501 Chancellor Street, just a few blocks down.

The stores served a mixed ethnic neighborhood, comprised of many European immigrants. Unlike Slobod's Delicatessen, Henry's store was mainly a grocery, but they cooked for their valued customers one day a week. Although my grandfather's store had no tables for eating in, there was always a huge group of people lining up outside the door waiting for him to put the "Freshly Cooked Corned Beef" sign in the window. Grandpa would haul the giant iron pots onto his huge stove in the back room and prepare the meat while on the other side of the kitchen Lena would be making huge tubs of potato salad, coleslaw, and other yummy offerings. Lena

always made a double batch of her potato salad and coleslaw for Harry's place, and they would do the same with their chopped liver and herring. By 10 A.M., all the food would be sold out and there were never any leftovers.

There was no such thing as "Day Old" in either store. Fresh baked goods were delivered daily at 7 A.M. by an old man in a faded, red-paneled truck. He'd unload the delectable fresh bread, cakes, apple fritters, and doughnuts, and by noon they were always sold out. On Sundays, the family would take long drives to farm stands in the Pennsylvania countryside to buy fresh produce for the week. Quality was very important to the Slobod clan.

By 1947, Pop and family moved to southern California, and Henry and family again followed suit. Henry went to work at a large deli in a local department store for a couple of years and in the early 1950s bought the deli department at a local market.

By that time, Lena had me to raise, and hung up her professional apron, but the Slobod house was always the place to celebrate birthdays, anniversaries, and holidays with scrumptious meals. She continued that tradition until her death in 1982.

Grandma's love of food and feeding hungry relatives and friends must've rubbed off on me because from a very early age I'd be in the kitchen helping her out. She taught me to make her delicious chopped liver, cheese blintzes, and cold beet borscht early on. I still have her old heavy iron food grinder that attaches to the cutting board, her big wooden bowl, and her hand chopper for making chopped herring. Food processors weren't invented yet, but even if they were around, I'm sure she would have considered them nonsense.

As a young adult, I knew I had to start writing all these recipes down, so I spent a lot of time in Grandma's kitchen watching her cook and taking notes. Thankfully, she lived to the ripe old age of eighty-nine, which afforded me plenty of time to get her best dishes into recipe form. Then I realized that while my grandmother's recipes were wonderful, so were those of the other grandmothers I knew and I began collecting recipes from other family members and friends. My recipe file is now bulging with delectable offerings that need to be passed on to future generations.

Many of the recipes in the book came from the kitchen of Slobod's Delicatessen. Some came over on the boat and landed on Ellis Island with my grandmother and the other immigrant grannies that have contributed their best recipes to this book. A few were made up over the ensuing years by the generations that followed.



Our dining room table was always full at mealtime.

How To Cook Like A Jewish Grandmother is a book of recipes for those brave folks who want to defy fate and truly enjoy a good old-fashioned meal. It will not include sodium levels, dietary fiber information, carbohydrate counts, or any other nutritional guidelines needed to maintain a healthy lifestyle. Taste is all that counts in this tome. That's not to say that there might not be a few accidentally healthy or low-calorie offerings in the book, but they are not intentional. They just happen to taste good, too.

You don't have to be Jewish to cook like a Jewish grandmother, nor do you have to be Jewish to enjoy the recipes offered in this book. It's all about comfort food and plenty of it. The recipes embrace the tastes of the Old World and are topped off with a huge dollop of love.

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