

Primary Source: Southern Cooking and Housekeeping Book, 1824 ^[1]

The expectations surrounding women in the antebellum South were tied to domesticity and ladyhood. Although life in the South was changing in many ways, the role of women was in the home, and within the home, the work of a housewife was never done, whether the woman be married to a planter or a yeoman farmer.

Mrs. Mary Randolph's The Virginia Housewife: Or, Methodical Cook was published in 1824 and provided more than 200 recipes and pages of housekeeping wisdom. Excerpts from The Virginia Housewife are below.

Introduction.

Management is an art that may be acquired by every woman of good sense and tolerable memory. If, unfortunately, she has been bred in a family where [domestic business](#) is the work of chance, she will have many difficulties to encounter; but a determined resolution to obtain this valuable knowledge, will enable her to [surmount](#) ^[2] all obstacles. She must begin the day with an early breakfast, requiring each person to be in readiness to take their seats when the muffins, buckwheat cakes, &c. are placed on the table. This looks social and comfortable. When the family [breakfast by detachments](#), the table remains a tedious time; [the servants are kept from their morning's meal](#), and a complete derangement takes place in the whole business of the day. No work can be done till breakfast is finished. The Virginia ladies, who are proverbially good managers, employ themselves, while their servants are eating, in washing the cups, glasses, &c.; arranging the [cruets](#) ^[3], the mustard, salt-sellers, pickle vases, and all the apparatus for the dinner table. This occupies but a short time, and the lady has the satisfaction of knowing that [they are in much better order than they would be if left to the servants](#). It also relieves her from the trouble of seeing the dinner table prepared, which [should be done every day with the same scrupulous regard to exact neatness and method, as if a grand company was expected](#). When the servant is required to do this daily, he soon gets into the habit of doing it well; and his mistress having made arrangements for him in the morning, there is no fear of bustle and confusion in running after things that may be called for during the hour of dinner. When the kitchen breakfast is over, and the cook has put all things in their proper places, the mistress should go in to give her orders. Let all the articles intended for the dinner, pass in review before her: have the butter, sugar, flour, meal, lard, given out in proper quantities; the catsup, spice, wine, whatever may be wanted for each dish, measured to the cook. The mistress must tax her own memory with all this: we have no right to expect slaves or hired servants to be more attentive to our interest than we ourselves are: they will never recollect these little articles until they are going to use them; the mistress must then be called out, and thus have the horrible drudgery of keeping house all day, when one hour devoted to it in the morning, would release her from trouble until the next day. There is [economy](#) as well as comfort in a regular mode of doing business. When the mistress gives out every thing, there is no waste; but [if temptation be thrown in the way of subordinates, not many will have power to resist](#) ^[4]; besides, it is an immoral act to place them in a situation which we pray to be exempt from ourselves.

The prosperity and happiness of a family depend greatly on the order and regularity established in it. The husband, who can ask a friend to partake of his dinner in full confidence of finding his wife unruffled by the pretty [vexations](#) ^[4] attendant on the neglect of household duties -- who can usher his guest into the dining-room assured of seeing that methodical nicety which is the essence of true elegance, -- will feel pride and [exultation](#) ^[5] in the possession of a companion, who gives to his home charms that [gratify](#) ^[6] every wish of his soul, and render the haunts of [dissipation](#) ^[7] hateful to him. The sons bred in such a family will be moral men, of steady habits; and the daughters, if the mother shall have performed the duties of a parent in the [superintendence](#) ^[8] of their education, as faithfully as she has done those of a wife, will each be a treasure to her husband; and being formed on the model of an exemplary mother, will use the same means for securing the happiness of her own family, which she has seen successfully practised under the paternal roof.

Pork.

To cure [bacon](#)

[Hogs are in the highest perfection, from two and a half to four years old](#) and make the best bacon, when they do not weigh more than one hundred and fifty or sixty at farthest; they should be fed with corn, six weeks at least, before they are killed, and the shorter distance they are driven to market, the better their flesh be. To secure them against the possibility of spoiling, [salt them before they get cold](#); take out the chine or back-bone from the neck to the tail, cut the hams, shoulders and [middlings](#); take the ribs from the shoulders and the leaf fat from the hams: have such tubs as are directed for beef, rub a large table spoonful of [saltpetre](#) on the [inside](#) of each ham, for some minutes, then rub both sides well with salt, sprinkle the bottom of the tub with salt, lay the hams with the skin downward, and put a good deal of salt between each layer; salt the shouldlers and middlings in the same manner, but less saltpetre is necessary; cut the jowl or chop from the head, and rub it with salt and saltpetre. You should cut off the feet just above the knee joint; take off the ears and nose, and lay them in a large tub of cold water for [souse](#). When the jowls have been in salt two weeks, hang them up to smoke -- do so with the shoulders and middlings at the end of three weeks, and the hams at the end of four. If they remain longer in salt they will be hard. Remember to hang the hams and shoulders with the [hooks](#) down, to preserve the juices. Make a good smoke every morning, and be careful not to have a blaze; the smoke-house should stand alone, for any additional heat will spoil the meat. During the hot weather, beginning the first of April, it should be occasionally taken down, examined -- rubbed with hickory ashes, and hung up again. The generally received opinion that saltpetre hardens meat, is entirely erroneous: -- it tends greatly to prevent [putrefaction](#) ^[9], but will not make it hard; neither will laying in brine five or six weeks in cold weather, have that effect, but remaining in salt too long, will certainly draw off the juices, and harden it. Bacon should be boiled in a large quantity of water, and a ham is not done sufficiently, till the bone on the under part comes off with ease. New bacon requires much longer boiling than that which is old.

Beef.

Calf's heart, a nice dish

Take the heart and liver from the [harslet](#) ^[10], and cut off the windpipe, boil the [lights](#) very tender, and cut them in small pieces -- take as much of the water they were boiled in as will be sufficient for gravy; add to it a large spoonful of white wine, one of lemon pickle, some grated nutmeg, pepper and salt, with a large spoonful of butter, mixed with one of white flour; let it boil a few minutes, and put in the minced lights, set it by till the heart and liver are ready, cut the ventricle out of the heart, wash it well, lard it all over with narrow slips of middling, fill the cavity with good [forcemeat](#), put it in a pan on the broad end, that the stuffing may not come out; bake it a nice brown, slice the liver an inch thick and broil it, make the mince hot, set the heart upright in the middle of the dish, pour it around, lay the broiled liver on, and garnish with bunches of fried parsley; it should be served up extremely hot.

Poultry, &c.

[Fried chickens](#)

Cut them up as for the fricassee, dredge them well with flour, sprinkle them with salt, put them into a good quantity of boiling lard, and fry them a light brown; fry small pieces of mush and a quantity of parsley nicely picked, to be served in the dish with the chickens; take half a pint of rich milk, add to it a small bit of butter, with pepper, salt, and chopped parsley; stew it a little, and pour it over the chickens, and then garnish with the fried parsley.

Ochra and tomatos

Take an equal quantity of each, let the ochra be young, slice it, and skin the tomatos; put them into a pan without water, add a lump of butter, an onion chopped fine, some pepper and salt, and stew them one hour.

Macaroni

Boil as much macaroni as will fill your dish, in milk and water, till quite tender; drain it on a sieve, sprinkle a little salt over it, put a layer in your dish, then cheese

and butter as in the polenta, and bake it in the same manner.

Mock macaroni

Break some crackers in small pieces, soak them in milk until they are soft; then use them as a substitute for macaroni.

Gaspacho -- Spanish

Put some soft biscuit or toasted bread in the bottom of a salad bowl, put in a layer of sliced tomatos with the skin taken off, and one of sliced cucumbers, sprinkled with pepper, salt, and chopped onion; do this until the bowl is full; stew some tomatos quite soft, strain the juice, mix in some mustard, oil, and water, and pour over it; make it two hours before it is eaten.

Sauces.

Fish sauce, to keep a year

Chop twenty-four anchovies, bones and all, ten shallots, a handful of scraped horse radish, four blades of mace, one quart of white wine, one pint of anchovy liquor, one pint of claret, twelve cloves, and twelve pepper corns; boil them together till reduced to a quart, then strain it off into a bottle for use. Two spoonsful will be sufficient for a pound of butter.

Pepper vinegar

Get one dozen pods of pepper when ripe, take out the stems, and cut them in two; put them in a kettle with three pints of vinegar, boil it away to one quart, and strain it through a sieve. A little of this is excellent in gravy of every kind, and gives a flavour greatly superior to black pepper; it is also very fine when added to each of the various catsups for fish sauce.

Vegetables.

To dress salad

To have this delicate dish in perfection, the lettuce, pepper grass, chervil, cress, &c. should be gathered early in the morning, nicely picked, washed, and laid in cold water, which will be improved by adding ice; just before dinner is ready to be served, drain the water from your salad, cut it into a bowl, giving the proper proportions of each plant; prepare the following mixture to pour over it: boil two fresh eggs ten minutes, put them in water to cool, then take the yolks in a soup plate, pour on them a table spoonful of cold water, rub them with a wooden spoon until they are perfectly dissolved; then add two spoonsful of oil: when well mixed, put in a teaspoonful of salt, one of powdered sugar, and one of made mustard; when all these are united and quite smooth, stir in two table spoonsful of [common](#), and two of tarragon vinegar; put it over the salad, and garnish the top with the whites of the eggs cut into rings, and lay around the edge of the bowl young scallions, they being the most delicate of the onion tribe.

Puddings, &c.

Apple fritters

Pare some apples, and cut them in thin slices -- put them in a bowl, with a glass of brandy, some white wine, a quarter of a pound of pounded sugar, a little cinnamon finely powdered, and the rind of a lemon grated; let them stand some time, turning them over frequently; beat two eggs very light, add one quarter of a pound of flour, a table-spoonful of melted butter, and as much cold water as will make a thin batter; drip the apples on a sieve, mix them with the batter, take one slice with a spoonful of batter to each fritter, fry them quickly of a light brown, drain them well, put them in a dish, sprinkling sugar over each, and glaze them nicely.

Cakes.

Dough nuts -- a Yankee cake

Dry half a pound of good brown sugar, pound it, and mix it with two pounds of flour, and sift it; add two spoonsful of yeast, and as much new milk as will make it like bread: when well risen, knead in half a pound of butter, make it in cakes the size of a half dollar, and fry them a light brown in boiling lard.

To make bread.

When you find the [barrel of flour](#) a good one, empty it into a chest or box, made for the purpose, with a lid that will shut close: it keeps much better in this manner than when packed in a barrel, and even improves by lying lightly; sift the quantity you intend to make up -- put into a bowl two [gills](#) and a half of water for each quart, with a tea-spoon heaped up with salt, and a large spoonful of yeast for each quart; stir this mixture well, put into another bowl one handful of flour from every quart; pour a little of the mixture on to wet it, then more, until you get it all in, taking great care that it be smooth, and quite free from lumps; beat it some minutes, take one-third of the flour out of the kettle, pour on the batter, and sprinkle over it the dry flour; stop the kettle, and set it where it can have a moderate degree of warmth: when it has risen well, turn it into a bowl, mix in the dry flour, and knead it on a board till it looks quite light; return it to the kettle, and place it where it can have proper heat: in the morning, take the dry crust carefully from the top, put the dough on a board, knead it well, make it into rolls, set them on tin sheets, put a towel over, and let them stand near the fire till the oven is ready. In winter, make the bread up at three o'clock, and it will be ready to work before bed time. In summer, make it up at five o'clock. A quart of flour should weigh just one pound and a quarter. [The bread must be rasped when baked.](#)

Pickling

Tomato catsup

Gather a [peck](#) of tomatos, pick out the stems, and wash them; put them on the fire without water, sprinkle on a few spoonsful of salt, let them boil steadily an hour, stirring them frequently; strain them through a colander, and then through a sieve; put the liquid on the fire with half a pint of chopped onions, half a quarter of an ounce of mace broke into small pieces; and if not sufficiently salt, add a little more -- one table-spoonful of whole black pepper; boil all together until just enough to fill two bottles; cork it tight. Make it in August, in dry weather.

Cordials, &c.

To make soap

Put on the fire [any quantity of lye you choose, that is strong enough to bear an egg](#)-- to each gallon, add three quarters of a pound of clean grease: boil it very fast, and stir it frequently -- a few hours will [suffice](#) ^[11] to make it good soap. When you find by cooling a little on a plate that it is a thick jelly, and no grease appears, put in salt in the proportion of one pint to three gallons -- let it boil a few minutes, and pour it in tubs to cool -- (should the soap be thin, add a little water to that in the plate, stir it well, and by that means ascertain how much water is necessary for the whole quantity; very strong lye will require water to thicken it, after the incorporation is complete; this must be done before the salt is added.) Next day, cut out the soap, melt it, and cool it again; this takes out all the lye, and keeps the soap from shrinking when dried. A strict conformity to these rules, will banish the lunar bugbear, which has so long annoyed soap makers. Should [cracknels](#) be

used, there must be one pound to each gallon. [Kitchen grease should be clarified in a quantity of water](#) or the salt will prevent its incorporating with the lye.

Soft soap is made in the same manner, only omitting the salt. It may also be made by putting the lye and grease together in exact proportions, and placing it under the influence of a hot sun for eight or ten days, stirring it well four or five times a day.

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Today "country ham" is an occasional (and often expensive) treat, but before refrigeration, nearly all pork had to be heavily salted for preservation.



[23]

If an antebellum family wanted worcestershire sauce or catsup, they had to make it themselves -- or have the servants do it.



[24]

Cooking measurements weren't standardized until the end of the nineteenth century. Cooks used ordinary household cups, glasses, and spoons to measure ingredients.



[25]

Families who could afford white flour bought it by the barrel.



[26]

Chunks of lye soap. Even soap had to be "cooked" -- from pork fat and fireplace ashes.

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