

The Best Cook in the World: Tales from My Momma's Southern Table

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A New York Times bestseller

Part cookbook, part memoir, *The Best Cook in the World* is Pulitzer Prize-winner Rick Bragg's loving tribute to the South, his family and, especially, to his extraordinary mother. Here are irresistible stories and recipes from across generations. They come, skillet by skillet, from Bragg's ancestors, from feasts and near famine, from funerals and celebrations, and from a thousand tales of family lore as rich and as sumptuous as the dishes they inspired. Deeply personal and unfailingly mouthwatering, *The Best Cook in the World* is a book to be savored.

Rick Bragg is the author of eight books, including the best-selling *Ava's Man* and *All Over but the Shoutin'*. He is also a regular contributor to *Garden & Gun* magazine. He lives in Alabama. Prologue:

It Takes a Lot of Rust to Wipe Away a General Electric

Since she was eleven years old, even if all she had to work with was neck bones, peppergrass, or poke salad, she put good food on a plate. She cooked for dead-broke uncles, hungover brothers, shade-tree mechanics, faith healers, dice shooters, hairdressers, pipe fitters, crop dusters, high-steel walkers, and well diggers. She cooked for ironworkers, Avon ladies, highway patrolmen, sweatshop seamstresses, fortune-tellers, coal haulers, dirt-track daredevils, and dime-store girls. She cooked for lost souls stumbling home from Aunt Hattie's beer joint, and for singing cowboys on the AM radio. She cooked, in her first eighty years, more than seventy thousand meals, as basic as hot buttered biscuits with pear preserves or muscadine jelly, as exotic as tender braised beef tripe in white milk gravy, in kitchens where the only ventilation was the banging of the screen door. She cooked for people she'd just as soon have poisoned, and for the loves of her life.

She cooked for the rich ladies in town, melting beef short ribs into potatoes and Spanish onions, another woman's baby on her hip, and sleepwalked home to feed her own boys home-canned blackberries dusted with sugar as a late-night snack. She pan-fried chicken in Red's Barbecue with a crust so crisp and thin it was mostly in the imagination, and deep-fried fresh bream and crappie and hush puppies redolent with green onion and government cheese. She seasoned pinto beans with ham bone and baked cracklin' cornbread for old women who had tugged a pick sack, and stewed fat spareribs in creamy butter beans that truck drivers would brag on three thousand miles from home. She spiked collard greens with cane sugar and hot pepper for old men who had fought the Hun on the Hindenburg Line, and simmered chicken and dumplings for mill workers with cotton lint still stuck in their hair. She fried thin apple pies in white butter and cinnamon for pretty young women with bus tickets out of this one-horse town, and baked sweet-potato cobbler for the grimy pipe fitters and dusty bricklayers they left behind. She cooked for big-haired waitresses at the Fuzzy Duck Lounge, shiny-eyed pilgrims at the Congregational Holiness summer campground, and crew-cut teenage boys who read comic books beside her banana pudding, then embarked for Vietnam.

She cooked, most of all, to make it taste good, to make every chipped melamine plate a poor man's banquet, because how do you serve dull food to people such as this? She

became famous for it, became the best cook in the world, if the world ends just this side of Cedartown. But she never used a cookbook, not in her whole life. She never cooked from a written recipe of any kind, and never wrote down one of her own. She cooked with ghosts at her sure right hand, and you can believe that or not. The people who taught her the secrets of Southern, blue-collar cooking are all gone now, and they did not cook from a book, either; most of them did not even know how to read and write. Every time the old woman stepped from her workshop of steel spoons, iron skillets, and blackened pots, all she knew about the food left with her, in the way, when a bird flies off a wire, it leaves only a black line on the sky.

"It's all I've ever been real good at, and people always bragged on my cooking . . . you know, 'cept the ones who don't know what's good," she told me when I asked her about her craft. "When I was little, the old women used to sit in their kitchens at them old Formica tables and drink coffee and tell their fortunes and talk and talk and talk, about their sorry old men and their good food and the good Lord, and they would cook, my God, they could cook. . . . And I just paid attention, and I done what they done. . . ."

Most chefs, when asked for a blueprint of their food, would only have to reach for a dog-eared notebook or a faded handwritten index card for ingredients, measures, cooking times, and the rest.

"I am not a chef," she said.

Yet she can tell if her flour is getting stale by rubbing it in her fingers.

"I am a cook."

I remember one night, when she was yearning for something sweet, she patted out tiny biscuits and plopped them down in a pool of milk flavored with sugar, cinnamon, vanilla, and cubes of cold butter. She baked this until the liquid, half whole milk, half thick, sweetened condensed milk, steamed into the biscuits, infusing them with the flavors underneath. It created not a dense slab, like a traditional, New Orleans-style bread pudding, but little islands of perfect sweet, buttery dumplings; the spacing, not the ingredients or cooking time, was the secret here. "Momma taught it to me, and Grandpa Bundrum taught it to her, and his momma taught it to him, and . . . well, I guess I don't really know no further than that."

In the roadside cafés, cooks in hairnets with Semper Fi on their forearms taught her to build the perfect burger from layers of charred, thin patties, melting cheese, rings of sweet Vidalia onion, and wheels of fresh tomato. They taught her crisp, fork-tender chicken-fried steak, and how to dress steamed foot-long hot dogs with homemade hot chili, just the right trickle of yellow mustard, and lots of finely diced onion, to make the pulpwooders weep. She learned to slow-cook pork barbecue from old men who lived in the smoke itself. "The workin' people wouldn't pay good money for food that wasn't fit to eat. I didn't make no money in a café . . . fourteen or fifteen dollars a week was the most I made. But at Red's café we got all the puddin' we could eat. Your uncle Ed's momma, Granny Fair, waitressed

at Red's when I was there. You remember her? She was kind of a big woman? Well, she'd bust through the double doors to that kitchen, snatch up one of them little chocolate puddin's, and eat it in three bites on a dead run-and not miss a step."

Her big sister, Edna, taught her to fillet catfish, crappie, and tiny bream with a knife as thin as aluminum foil. A brother-in-law, a navy man, taught her how to pat out a fine cathead biscuit, but could only bake them a battleship at a time. Her mother-in-law showed her how to craft wild-plum pies, peach, apple, and cherry cobblers, and cool banana puddings, all in pans as big as she was. Her daddy shared the secrets of fresh ham and perfect redeye gravy, and tender country-fried steak. And her momma taught her to do it all, even with a worried mind. Then, finally, it was her time, and it has been for a long, long time.

"I have to talk to myself now to cook," she said. "I have to tell myself what to do, have to tell myself to handle the knife by the right end. I have to call myself a name, so I'll know to listen to myself."

"By what name," I asked, beginning to be concerned, "do you call yourself?"

"Why, I use my name, hon. I ain't so far gone I don't know my name. I'll say, "Margaret, don't burn yourself," and "Margaret, close the cabinet so you won't bump your head." It's when I do call myself by somebody else's name that y'all got to worry about me. Till then, hon, I'm alllll right."

She had hoped for a daughter to pass her skills and stories to-that or a thoughtful son, someone worthy of the history, secrets, and lore; instead, she got three nitwit boys who would eat a bug on a bet and still cannot do much more than burn a weenie on a sharp stick, and could not bake a passable biscuit even if you handed us one of those whop-'em cans from the Piggly Wiggly and prayed for bread. We ate her delicious food without much insight into how it came to be, which was not all our fault. She banned us from her kitchen outright, much of our lives, because we tracked in red mud, coal dust, or some more terrible contaminant, or tried to show her a new species of tadpole as she made biscuit. We are still barely tolerated there, though I have not stomped in a mud hole or hidden a toad in my overalls for along time. So she would be the end of it, then, the end of the story of her table, unless we could find another way.

I made up my mind to do this book not on a day when my mother was in her kitchen, making miracles, but on a day she was not. Most days, unless she is deep in Ecclesiastes, or Randolph Scott is riding at all horse across the TV screen, she will be at her stove, singing about a church in the wildwood, or faded love, or trains. In the mornings, the clean scent of just-sliced cantaloupe will drift through the house, mingling with eggs scrambled with crumbled sausage, and coffee so strong and dark that black is its true color, not just the way you take it. At noon, the air will be thick with the aroma of stewed cabbage, sweet corn, cornbread muffins, and creamed onions going tender in an iron skillet forged before the First Great War. Some nights, you can smell fried chicken livers as far as the pasture fence, or barbecued pork chops, pan-roasted pig's feet, potatoes and pole beans, or blackberry cobbler in a buttered biscuit crust. But as I walked into the house in the winter

of 2016, to find some clothes to take to her hospital room, the kitchen smelled only of lemon-scented dishwashing detergent, and a faint aroma of old, cold, burnt iron.

In her life, she saw weeds creep over the Model T, and church steeples vanish beneath the man-made lakes of the TVA. She saw great blast furnaces go up, and go dark, and ancestral mountains clear-cut down to bald nobs. She saw circus trains, and funeral trains, and the first gleaming diesel engine roar through these hills. She saw a Russian monkey in a spaceman suit, and figured, well, now she had seen it all. "It made me sad, when they shot him into outer space. They showed him on the TV again when he come back down, but I ain't sure it was the right monkey, you know, the same one." The point is, I had convinced myself she was somehow immune to passing time, that she lived outside and above the events of the twentieth century, and the twenty-first. She could no more wear out than the whetstone she used to sharpen her ancient butcher knives, even if she had seasoned most of the vegetables she ever ate with pork fat.

"Gettin' old ain't easy," she told me, as she passed seventy-nine, "but it's best not to try and fight it too much. You know how I live with bein' old? I just don't look in the mirror, 'cept when I part my hair."

She passed eighty in April of 2017 with a baseball bat beside her bed, for assassins. In the past five years, she survived heart failure, serious cancer, dangerous surgeries, and harsh follow-up treatments that left her thinner and weaker over time. Still, I rarely saw her stumble, or waver in her resolve to live as she always has, to walk her garden, gripe about the weather, and rattle her pots and pans. She survived everything, but in the late winter of 2016, the hospital entrance had become a revolving door, and she was admitted and readmitted for regimens of strong medicine and rest. Again, the young doctors said she would recover, if she would eat the dull, bland food and drink the foul-tasting medicine that was made, she believed, from the manure in her donkey pasture. She could go home again, the doctors told us, if she would behave herself, and if, after so many hard, hot, long days, she still had the will. She was not an ideal patient.

"That stent they put in my heart a year or two ago, well, they didn't really have to do that," she grumbled from her bed. "That was just the style then. Ever'body was gettin' one. I didn't need it. I was fine."

She spent most of the spring on an IV. While she slept, my big brother and I talked quietly beside her bed about being boys, running buck wild through her kitchen, about big fish, and ugly dogs, and a pearl-white '67 Camaro he never let me drive. The past is where we go when we are helpless; the past, no matter what the psychiatrists say, can't really hurt you much more than it already has, not like the future, which comes at you like a train around a blind curve. But our conversation always circled back to the thing that mattered most. I am not a particularly optimistic man, and feared for her. Sam told me I was being foolish. She would get better this time, too; it was just a matter of time before she got tired of this place and walked out, grumbling. He said he knew her better than I did; he was living

his life within three miles of her, while I went gallivanting God knows where. He said the same thing over and over, like a prayer. "That old woman picked cotton . . . did stuff the regular people can't do. They don't know who she is."

"Do you remember the junk stoves? Remember that graveyard?" he asked me one evening, and I shook my head. He seemed deeply disappointed in me, as if I had somehow failed my heritage by not remembering every anthill, blown-over willow tree, vicious blackberry bush, and rotted-down rope swing on the Roy Webb Road. "How," he asked me, "do you not remember that many burnt-out stoves?"

And then I did remember them, a ragged row of scorched, rusted relics banished to the deep backyard, worn out, shorted out, and dragged out of the little frame house to a place past the rusty bicycle junkyard and the doghouse, to the edge of the cotton field. The years bring down everything here, in the heat, damp, and rot, but it takes a lot of rust to wipe away a General Electric. The number varied, but at one time there were thirteen derelict stoves abandoned there, bound to the earth by honeysuckle, briars, and creeping vines: Westinghouse, Kenmore, Hotpoint, GE, and more, in white, brown, and avocado. She used them till there was a near electrocution, or an electrical fire, till there was not a spark left.

"Momma wore 'em all slap-out, one after another," he said. "She cooked every meal we ate, seven days a week . . . except when she got us all a foot-long from Pee Wee Johnson's caf  , every payday, every Friday night. To be honest, I guess most of them ol' stoves was second- and third-hand to start with, but it's still a lot of stoves, ain't it? Just think . . . think what it took to wear out that many stoves."

"I had a big forty-two-inch stove in my kitchen one time, when we lived with Momma," the old woman said from the hospital bed, her eyes still closed. She pretended to be asleep sometimes, so she could hear what was being said about her. "But it wadn't no-'count, to start with. I melted the buttons off of it."

There, in Room 411, she even dreamed of food, or maybe just remembered it. She saw herself waist-deep in rows of fat, ripe tomatoes hanging heavy on vines that ran green for as far as she could see. She reached into a vine and pulled one free, rubbed it clean on her shirt, and took a saltshaker from a pocket of her clothes. She ate it, standing in the blowing red grit, salting every delicious bite, until it was all gone, the way she'd done when she was young. She told me about it later, amid the alarms of the IV machines, the barking intercom, and call buttons that never went quiet, even at 3:00 a.m. "And it just seemed so real I could taste it," she said, and I told her she must be on some fine dope if she could taste a dream.

She lay there day after day, and planned what she would cook once she got home, what she would grow in her garden and pepper pots, or gather in the woods and fields for jellies, preserves, and pickles. "I lost the spring," she told me one morning, after a particularly bad few days, and for some reason that simple declaration haunted me more than anything else. "I lost one whole spring."

I would like to say that something profound happened after that, something poetic. The truth is, as my big brother predicted, she just got mad. It bothered her that she could not tell if she was dreaming or remembering...

Other Books

Tales My Father Taught Me. The biography of the poet, essayist, novelist, and writer of short stories and art criticism.

“It will be understood that for a good cook to have to send up that concoction would be derogatory; and how often have I not heard my mother declare that he could ruin the best chef in the world, if left alone with him for two days to ...”