

THE LOWER CEDAR WATERSHED COOKBOOK

Caite Dolan-Leach

“The pleasure of eating should be an extensive pleasure, not that of the mere gourmet. People who know the garden in which their vegetables have grown and know that the garden is healthy will remember the beauty of the growing plants, perhaps in the dewy first light of morning when gardens are at their best. Such a memory involves itself with the food and is one of the pleasures of eating.” Wendell Berry, *The Art of the Commonplace: The Agrarian Essays*

I propose a **compilation of recipes and narratives** that originate from the Lower Cedar watershed. These recipes, contributed by community members, will acknowledge the agriculture that is central to Iowa, its people and its economy. To this end, each recipe has found space in homes here within this watershed, and makes use of ingredients grown here, with this water. The cookbook will also contain **narratives about food**, meals, community and family alongside the recipes, which provides context to the dishes presented.

Creating a community-based cookbook is not a new concept, but it is unusual to frame a cookbook **in terms of a watershed**. But food systems are inherently linked to watersheds: food can't be grown without water, and how food is grown impacts the watershed cycle. In Iowa, this relationship is starkly evident: the agricultural practices that produce food, not just for Iowans, but for the world, have measurable consequences on water quality and usage. This cookbook serves as a space to reflect on this interconnectedness, and to consider how food is grown within and how it impacts the Lower Cedar watershed. **Food is central to community**: by framing the recipes as constitutive and representative of the Lower Cedar watershed, the culture of the community will also be reflected. How we cultivate, prepare and share food shapes our collective culture.

The contributors to this cookbook will reflect the diversity of the community, including recipes from as many as possible different culinary backgrounds that reside in Iowa-- and how they join together, combine and create new culinary traditions as they meet in conversation. While recipes that highlight **local ingredients are warmly welcomed, it is not mandatory**-- one of the purposes of the cookbook is to reflect on how and where ingredients are sourced, without designating certain foods as from “elsewhere.” The goal is to acknowledge the importance of a sense of place, even as we acknowledge the **global movement of people, food and recipes**.

In order to kick off the project, and to solicit recipes and narratives, I propose beginning with a **community dinner**. This event can serve as an opportunity to spend time and share a meal with neighbors, but also as an opportunity to ask folks to contribute their important recipes and the stories that accompany them. Held at a local venue, the food could be prepared potluck-style--with everyone bringing a dish to pass-- or it could be used to showcase a local chef/collective of chefs and their cuisine. The dinner would function to start a conversation that would lead to this community collaboration.

Community members would be invited to share a meal together and would be asked to come prepared with a recipe.

Call for Recipes:

We ask that each family that attends this community dinner come prepared with a recipe to share. While recipes that revolve around local ingredients are warmly welcomed, any ingredients or cuisines will happily be included: our goal is to reflect the diversity of Iowa and the movement of food as well as people throughout the world.

With your recipe, we ask that you include:

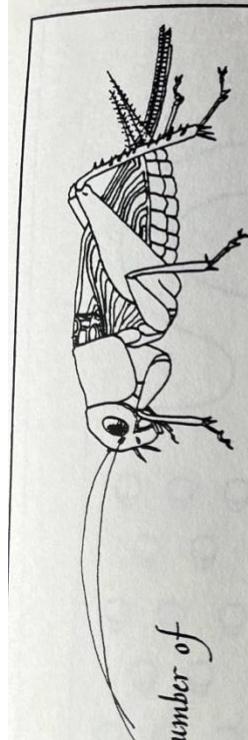
- *A short story about food or a meal. Your story may be explicitly linked to your recipe, but we're interested in hearing any stories about food (or growing or harvesting it).*
- *A reflection on where the ingredients in your recipe come from. If ingredients are sourced locally, where and how are they grown? If not, where can you find them, and what types of resources go into producing and transporting them?*

Dinner attendees may bring the dish described by their recipe; sitting around a table and tasting each dish will hopefully elicit conversations around foodways and the practice of sharing a meal. By the end of the dinner, attendees will have contributed a recipe, or will at least have an idea of what they'd like to contribute. These recipes can then be collated in either a digital or physical form and distributed to any community member.

Outreach into a diverse collection of recipes will be essential: immigrant communities are frequently excluded from certain types of community collaboration, and this cookbook would need to deliberately reflect on and actively solicit recipes from within those communities as well. If translation services are required, there are resources at the University of Iowa's Translation Department that could facilitate cross-lingual exchange.

Models of other community cookbooks will be informative. *The Scattergood Cookbook* offers a local example that could easily be imitated, including commentary (and illustrations!) of local practices. This cookbook is intensely local, designed with a very

specific audience in mind, and also offers practical solutions to large-scale cooking. It also includes information about local floral and fauna: one entry talks about the botanical "shooting stars," a remnant of Iowa prairie that can be found in the cemetery in time for Mother's Day. Another insert offers an algorithm for measuring temperature through grasshoppers, alongside a recipe for Lentil Roast.



1897, Dolbear's Law:
The cricket as thermometer.

$$T = 50 + \frac{N-40}{4}$$
 where
 T is temperature & N is the number of
cricket chirps per minute.

then rice. Sprinkle with cheese,
then wheat germ. Dot with butter.
350° for 30 minutes

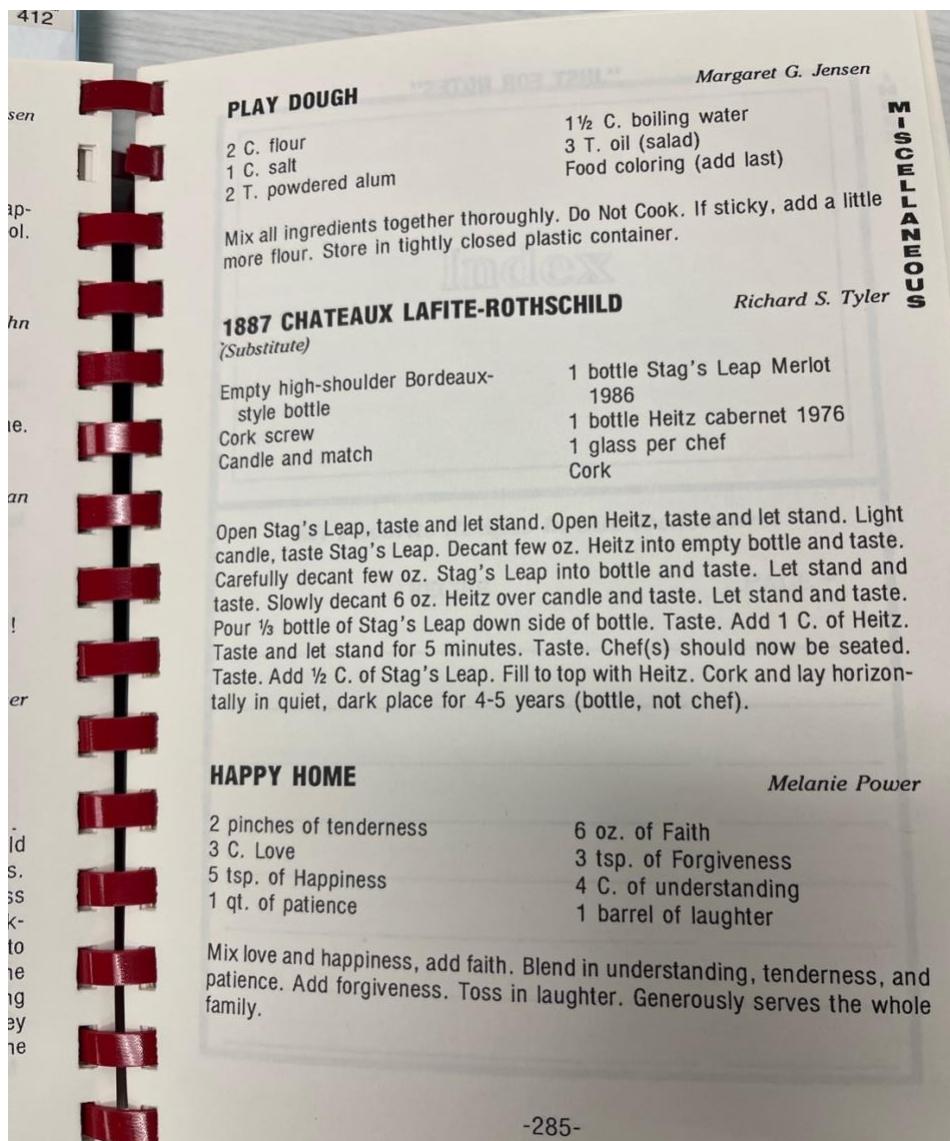
Lentil Roast

1 cup lentils
2 $\frac{2}{3}$ cups water
1 can evaporated milk
2 eggs
 $\frac{2}{3}$ cup oil
3 cups cornflakes
1 teaspoon salt
2 teaspoons sage

1 cup walnuts or peanuts, crushed
Simmer the lentils in the water
until tender and all the water is
absorbed. Combine with rest of
the ingredients and bake in an
oiled casserole.

300° for 45 minutes

The West Branch Community Cookbook includes recipes for some deeply eighties-inflected dishes (a lot of mayonnaise) but also reflects a certain whimsical down-homeness that could inflect this cookbook as well. Hamburger Helper features prominently in the Main Dishes, but one page offers us recipes for playdough, a strategy for imitating one-hundred-year-old Chateau-Lafite-Rothschild wine, and a recipe for a “Happy Home.” While this last recipe sounds a little cloying, or more appropriate for a needlepoint pillow, the creative flexibility and reflection of community values could serve as inspiration for more imaginatively interpreted contributions.



Other “watershed cookbooks,” while fairly rare, tend to focus on foraging, harvesting and hunting within the region, and the Lower Cedar Watershed Cookbook

could certainly include segments that focus on this type of hyper-local production. [The Wild Harvest Ohio Cookbook](#), for example, is produced by the wildlife division in Ohio, and instructs home cooks on how to prepare wild game--there are also instructional YouTube videos that accompany the recipes. [The Wild Su Feast Cookbook](#), from the Susitna River Coalition in Alaska highlights recipes from things that "walked, swam, grew and flew through our magnificent Susitna Watershed." It is easy to imagine an Iowa corollary that would highlight local hunting or fishing practices, as well as a segment on foraging. There is a [Facebook community](#) of morel hunters in Eastern Iowa, for example, who might be asked to contribute a recipe for wild-found morels, and would be able to speak about foraging practices and provide narratives about what it is like to move through the outdoor physical space, as they walk on top of the mycorrhizal network that generates that delicious, hyper-local ingredient.

Ultimately, many of the recipes are likely to be more quotidian than wild-foraged ramps and fish pulled fresh from the stream: the cookbook will also certainly include the types of meals people put on their own tables every day, and that reflect the reality of life in the Lower Cedar. We want to include the comfort meal that is served to families on snowy Wednesday nights, and the salad that you bring to the first warm picnic of the summer alongside tips for making venison jerky from the buck you shot in your own field, or the description of how to make your grandmother's tamales.

Drawings or photographs could accompany these recipes: for the morels, it would probably be instructive to include some visual aids for identifying them, for example. Illustrations by local artists could be included, as could photographs of the finished dishes, their ingredients or the people who created them. Budget will, of course, be the determining factor for this: it's simple enough to include photos on a website, but a physical book will necessarily have layout restrictions and costs when it comes to, say, reproductions of watercolor illustrations. Obviously, it would be glorious to produce a beautiful coffee table book that could be sold at Prairie Lights and could serve as a national model for how to think about Watershed Cooking. But even the bare-bones version in keeping with old-school PTA cookbooks (or The Scattergood Cookbook) would accomplish the main goal of the project: to unite a community in thinking about how food is produced and shared, and in considering themselves part of a physical, naturally defined watershed, rather than simply a municipality.