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Good Read

BY NANCY SCHEEMAKER

Jubilee: Recipes from Two Centuries of African American Cooking

by Toni Tipton-Martin. New York: Clarkson Potter, November 5, 2019, 320 pages, 8 x 10, Hardcover, \$35.00, ISBN 9781524761738

“If this burns, I’m going to cry.” Peering through the glass of the oven door window, I was excited, but anxious. I really wanted this to succeed. I was baking pie, and what I considered a difficult pie for me. Serious business. Observing the meringue darkening, it was hard not to angst when I’d gotten everything else right—a six inch tower of white, sweet, but not too sweet, meringue—a nice thin crisping layer with no trace of burn (yet), the towering crown of the pie. Just beneath the surface—a three-inch thick, bright yellow lemon pudding and the also critical, flaky “Best-ever Pie Crust” (p. 305–6), cradling the entire composition. This was looking like the pie of my dreams, and I didn’t want to ruin it. In the end, it was, hands down, the very best version of a lemon meringue pie that I have ever created. Heavenly. Ode to discovering *Jubilee: Recipes from Two Centuries of African American Cooking*.

The cookbook by Toni Tipton-Martin won the James Beard Award in 2020, and is, as the title implies, a celebration. Featuring over 100 recipes, “*Jubilee* presents techniques, ingredients, and dishes that show the roots of African American cooking?” (Penguin Random House).¹ This is not Tipton-Martin’s first award-winning cookbook. In 2015, she published, *The Jemima Code: Two Centuries of African American Cooking*, a groundbreaking work showcasing the author’s coast-to-coast collection of over 300 African American cookbooks, some dating back to the mid-19th century. And although the publication of *The Jemima Code* served to unveil and spotlight the legacy of black cooks and their cookbooks, *Jubilee* expands this story further by utilizing recipes of this collection documented by skilled, middle-class black cooks. Whether formally or informally trained, as employee or business owner, the story behind the recipes in *Jubilee* are of cooks whose culinary

legacy reaches far beyond the limited perspective that soul food and Southern plantation cooking define the entirety of African American cuisine.

Tipton-Martin clarifies:

At its core, African American cuisine reflects the blending of two distinct culinary styles. One was crafted by ingenious and industrious field hands in the slave cabin, from meager ingredients, informed by African techniques. The other signifies the lavish cooking—in the plantation kitchen or in kitchens staffed or owned by people educated formally and informally in culinary arts. (*Jubilee*, p. 12)

Exploring this cookbook brightened many a winter afternoon in 2021.

Thus far, there were no leftovers from the Curried Meat Pies with a curried pastry crust (p. 38), Buttermilk Biscuits (p. 87), Layered Garden Salad with Garlic and Herb Dressing (p.153), Spanish Cornbread (p. 100), Baked (Barbecued) Beans (p. 165), Wilted Mixed Greens with Bacon (p. 148), Island Banana Bread (p.110), Sweet Potato Salad with Orange-Maple Dressing (p. 156), Buttermilk Fried Chicken (p. 243), Pineapple Upside-Down Cake (p. 277), and Gingerbread with Lemon Sauce (pp. 282–3).

My shopping list is ready for the Seafood Gumbo (pp. 132–3), Gumbo Z’herbes (p. 142), Jambalaya (p. 173), Baked Macaroni and Cheese (p. 177), String Beans à la Creole (p. 187), Braised Celery (p. 188), Coffee-Scented Short Ribs Braised in Red Wine (pp. 209–10), Biscuit-Topped Chicken Pot Pie (pp. 238–9), Catfish Étouffée (p. 254), and Apple Hot Toddlies (p. 76).

A great cookbook for me has inspiring photos and context for the journey, priming me to understand creating “the food” in a much more expansive way. *Jubilee* has all of this and more. Reading and



Lemon meringue pie. All photos of food creations provided by the author.

cooking from the perspective of someone that I may never know or meet—someone from another country, or living in a different century, or somewhere other than



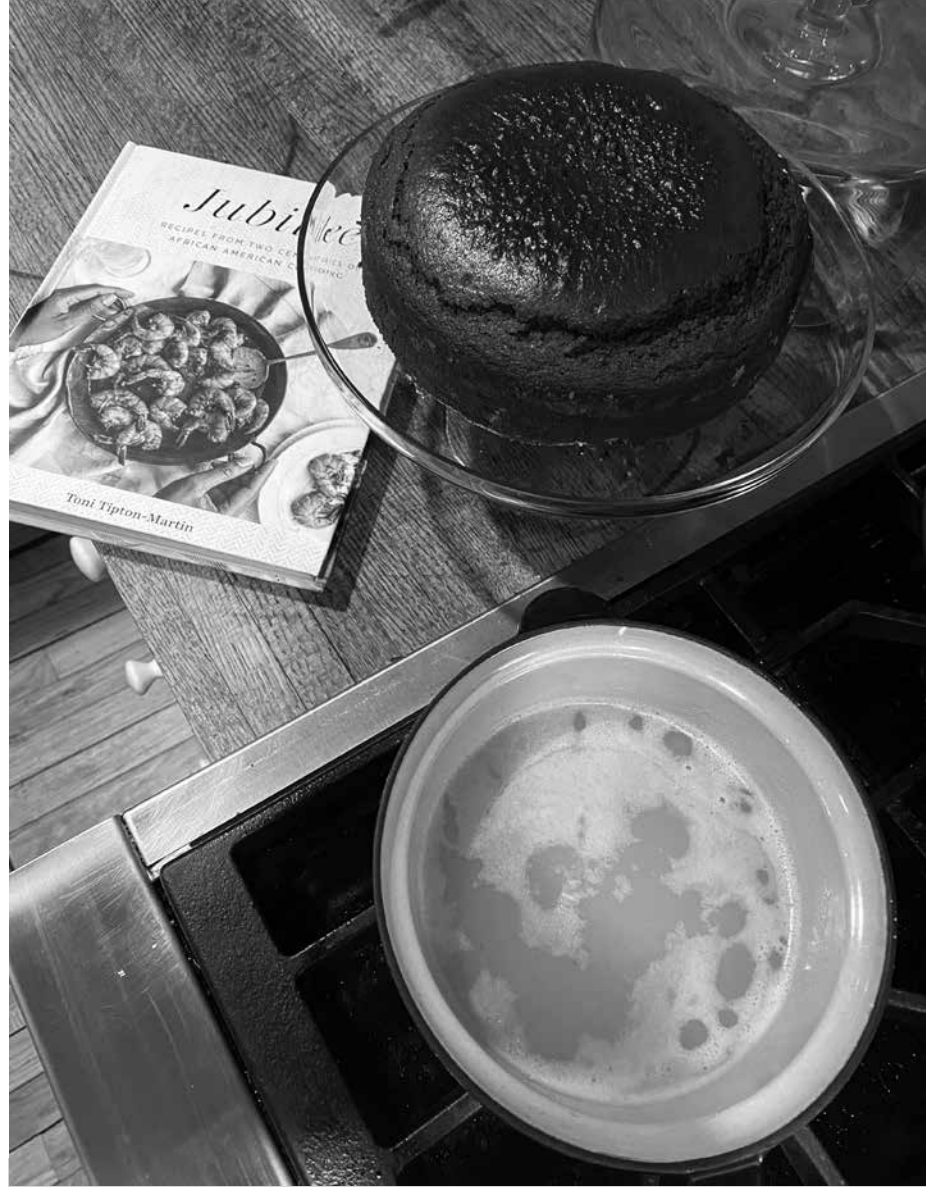
Chicken pot pie.

COVID-19 times, is surely, like learning a language, one the most intimate ways of beginning to understand someone else's life experience. The way we incorporate and create our daily food—whether for pure sustenance, comfort, celebration, or service—reveals a tale of time and place, culture and landscape, and certainly a glimpse at tradition and values.

In this popular age of minimalist living, I often look at my floor-to-ceiling collection of cookbooks, and I ask myself—do I really need all these cookbooks? The answer is eventually, and always, yes. Even if I don't



Pork chops with caper lemon sauce.



Gingerbread with lemon sauce.

obsess over cooking every recipe, which appears to be the case with *Jubilee*, the cookbooks in my house—from Ireland to the Amish—have profoundly saturated and influenced the entirety of my life. And now, when travel and experience are confined to the drive to my bookstore work, a stop at the grocery store, gas station, and home, they are often my oasis for escape and discovery. I've certainly cooked from a listed recipe on the Internet, but I'm here to argue that the book is wholeheartedly better.

I've been watching the uptick in cookbook sales at the bookstore, an outgrowth I think from all of this forced "home staying" we now endure. Perhaps, for some this will create an opportunity to achieve the satisfaction and excitement of reproducing a culinary story. For others, maybe it will renew

an old realization that real living occurs over a shared table of well-prepared food and is irreplaceable. For me, I'm tightening my grip on my cookbook collection—and joyously pursuing my adventure with *Jubilee*. ▼

Note:

¹ See <https://www.penguinrandomhouse.com/books/558144/jubilee-by-toni-tipton-martin/>)

—Nancy Scheemaker
General Manager, Northshire Bookstore,
Saratoga Springs, NY



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