

Council, M. (1999). *Mama Dip's kitchen*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press. Hardbound, 230 pages, \$24.95.

Mama Dip's Kitchen is the culinary autobiography of a Southern, African-American woman. It is a cookbook, but it is also a story of the life of Mildred Council, also known as Mama Dip, told through the foods that nourished it both physically and spiritually. Her cookbook contains a range of hearty, simple regional recipes, made from ingredients such as cornmeal and pork which were the mainstays of a farming family's diet. Instead of high-class petits-fours, Council gives a recipe coconut tarts and adds a practical hint, "These tarts sell well at school fund-raising events" (p. 201). Council's food is every-day, hearty, and homey.

Many of Council's recipes are accompanied by a first-person note about the way she and her family enjoyed that dish, for example Cornmeal "Plumb" Bread ("I remember this from visiting my aunt and uncle's house," p. 42) or Chicken Giblets with Noodles ("This was my children's favorite meal growing up," p. 56). In addition, the book contains a fascinating autobiographical introduction that defines the context in which Council invented and enjoyed her recipes. She was born about 1930 in rural North Carolina and grew up as the daughter of a black sharecropper. In 1974, once her children were grown, she opened a restaurant with only \$64 in her pocket to buy raw materials for breakfast the first day. The recipes in her cookbook, which she wrote because of the encouragement of her customers, are her favorites and the ones which made her restaurant successful. Council loves to cook, especially for other people, and this book is another way for her to share the joy of food.

The recipes themselves have instructions which are clear and simple but not incredibly detailed and assume some foreknowledge of basic cooking techniques. The cookbook's primary audience is cooks who has enough experience to be comfortable "winging it" somewhat but not enough to make up the recipes independently; however, a novice cook should not be daunted by lack of experience. Council makes it clear that deviation from her recipes is desirable and encourages experimentation, and she even tells stories about her own botched experiments. Furthermore, there are no pictures of the finished product to make the reader-cook feel that his pie crust isn't as delicate, flaky, or golden as Mama Dip's.

The book is written in standard American English but contains occasional colloquial turns of phrase which pleasantly recall the author's Southern voice; for example, she says that hushpuppies will "cook too slow" if overcrowded (p. 35). Recipes are organized by category; the five categories ("Breads and Breakfast Dishes," "Poultry, Fish, and Seafood," "Beef, Pork, and Lamb," "Vegetables and Salads," and "Desserts, Beverages, and Party Dishes") might be unintuitive to some readers, but all recipes as well as major ingredients are also indexed alphabetically in the back of the book. The index also includes cross-references; for example, "ground beef" is cross-referenced to "hamburger." A nice touch is that all recipes can be viewed in their entirety without turning a page. The paper is of an off-white color which shows up spills and spatters less than pure white.

At the beginning of my review I said that Mama Dip's Kitchen was a cookbook and an autobiography. It also functions in part as a defense of Southern African-American culture, through the sharing not only of recipes but of stories of family, love,

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and happiness. Mama Dip grew up poor but happy, in a family that appreciated the importance of education; she is a self-taught entrepreneur who opened a restaurant with \$64 in her pocket and has now authored a cookbook of her own recipes. Mama Dip's Kitchen will teach you not only to cook, but to enjoy it.