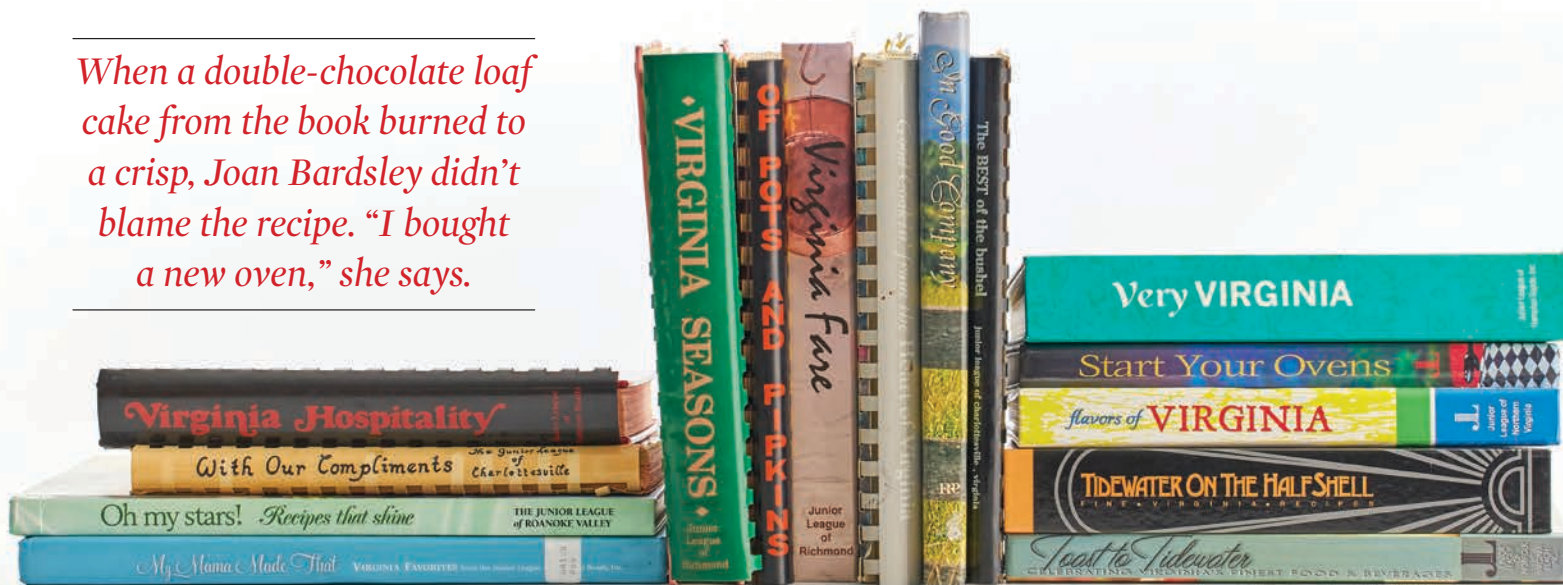


When a double-chocolate loaf cake from the book burned to a crisp, Joan Bardsley didn't blame the recipe. "I bought a new oven," she says.



Why We All Love Junior League Cookbooks

From casseroles to chowchow, they capture local flavors.

By VICKI L. FRIEDMAN | Photography by TYLER DARDEN

LONG BEFORE THE FOOD NETWORK brought us celebrity chefs, we turned to Junior League cookbooks for inspiration. There, we discovered the stroganoffs, aspics, and seven-layer dips that our friends and neighbors swore by. Tried and true, the recipes were triple-tested by committees of women who knew a thing or two about good taste.

Some 200 Junior League cookbooks have been published by chapters across the country. These are books to savor. We recognize the names of recipe contributors and chuckle at the homespun stories that often accompany them. And they make wonderful gifts. "Everybody got one at a bridal shower," says Samantha Bishop, former president of the Hampton Roads chapter.

And one fan says the books solved an annual birthday dilemma. "My brother gives me a Junior League cookbook from a new city every year. It's become a fun tradition between us."

Plenty of home cooks still rely on the books, compiled by the volunteers of the nonprofit that originated in New York City in 1901 to promote civic engagement. With 290 U.S. chapters, the Junior League also has chapters in the UK, Canada, and Mexico.

Tassie Pippert, a culinary professor at The Hart School at James Madison University, never tires of a good Junior League cookbook. "They're so regional," she says.

In Cincinnati that means chili. In New Orleans, it's gumbo. Virginia's Junior League cookbooks reflect the ham, peanuts, and oysters from the Tidewater region; Shenandoah apples from Roanoke, while traditional Southern fare rules in Lynchburg. Northern Virginia's *Flavors of Virginia* is a melting pot, with Wine Tour Quinoa to Best of Both Worlds Deviled Eggs.

"Anything out of Northern Virginia has a worldwide perspective, because that's what the

area holds," Pippert notes.

The recipes are blessedly uncomplicated, though few are as simple as Foolproof Rib Roast on page 173 in *Virginia Seasons*, from Richmond's Junior League. Two of the recipe's three ingredients are salt and pepper.

Some, like *My Mama Made That*, published by the Hampton Roads' chapter, throw in a dash of homespun humor. "A well-dressed table is like a well-dressed man. Both are pleasant to look at no matter what they're dishing out," reads one mama-ism. The book offers a full page of Smithfield ham advice: "Mama used to say that all Smithfield hams are country hams, but not

all country hams are Smithfields," along with kitchen hacks, like how to salvage an over-salted soup: drop a peeled potato into the simmering broth to absorb the mistake.

A millennial browsing the websites of Virginia's eight Junior League chapters might not realize the cookbooks' wider impact. Now in its fourth printing, the inaugural *What Can I Bring?* has raised more than \$150,000 for the Northern Virginia League's community initiatives. *Virginia Hospitality*, published by the Hampton Roads League has sold 300,000 copies and counting. Proceeds from the books support literacy programs, domestic violence shelters, food banks,





A TASTE OF VIRGINIA'S JUNIOR LEAGUE COOKBOOKS

The Junior League of Charlottesville:

- *With Our Compliments*
- *Best of the Bushel*

The Junior League of Roanoke Valley:

- *Of Pots and Pipkins*
- *Oh My Stars!*

The Junior League of Richmond:

- *Virginia Seasons: New Recipes from the Old Dominion*
- *Virginia Fare: A Culinary View of the Commonwealth*

The Junior League of Lynchburg:

- *In Good Company: Hospitality from the Homes and Hills of Virginia*
- *Good Cookin' from the Heart of Virginia*

The Junior League of Northern Virginia:

- *Flavors of Virginia: What Can I Bring Through the Seasons?*

The Junior League of Bristol:

- *Start Your Ovens: Cooking the Way It Ought'a Be*

The Junior League of Hampton Roads:

- *Very Virginia*
- *Virginia Hospitality*
- *My Mama Made That*

The Junior League of Norfolk-Virginia Beach:

- *Tidewater on the Half Shell* (McIlhenny Hall of Fame inductee)
- *Toast to Tidewater: Celebrating Virginia's Finest Food & Beverages*

Above illustration: "Pineapple and strawberries in Kirsch" from *With Our Compliments*, published by the Junior League of Charlottesville, 1976.

foster care programs, and more.

Joan Bardsley of Great Falls has cooked every recipe in *What Can I Bring?* for a supper club she started with four other couples in 1988. "I tell you, there's not a bad one in the book," Bardsley insists. The red pepper dip is foolproof, she says, and the tortilla lasagna is a family favorite. When a double-chocolate loaf cake from the book burned to a crisp, she didn't blame the recipe. "I bought a new oven."

Recipe testers ensure each is a success. "If you got three people that really liked the recipe, you were good," says Laura Shuford, who chaired the cookbook committee for Richmond's Junior League and recalls the volunteer job became a full-time commitment. Two columns of recipe testers are listed in the index of the Northern Virginia cookbook.

Some recipes are timeless. French Quarter Cheese Dip from the Richmond book dresses up cream cheese with brown sugar, mustard, pecans, and Worcestershire sauce. Others don't make the cut. "There were a lot with aspic that didn't



FOOLPROOF RIB ROAST

Recipe contributed to *Virginia Seasons: New Recipes from the Old Dominion* by Judy Brooks, published by the Junior League of Richmond.

1 standing rib roast
Salt & pepper

Let roast stand at room temperature, 30 minutes per pound. Season with salt and pepper. Place in a 500°F oven, rib side down in shallow baking dish. Cook five minutes per pound. Turn off heat and leave in oven for two hours. Roast will be crusty and brown outside, but rare and juicy inside. Preparation, five minutes. Serves two per rib.

make it," Shuford recalls, "along with a Brandy Alexander pie."

Virginia Hospitality from Hampton Roads earned a spot in the McIlhenny Hall of Fame, which honors cookbook classics. The book, bound by a plastic comb, features a pineapple on its cover—a nod to the colonists' welcome symbol. The League's 1995 book *Very Virginia* featured only a few photos, but for their 2009 book, *My Mama Made That*, a professional food photographer employed a little extra olive oil to add shine to lettuce and other veggies.

The Hampton Roads book doesn't list recipe contributors, by design. "Because someone's grandma and somebody else's grandma some-

times have the same recipe," Bishop says. Contrast that with *Start Your Ovens*, the official Bristol Motor Speedway cookbook, published by the Junior League of Bristol. The book's recipe for Family Race Night Taco Casserole, submitted by Nancy Andretti, identifies her as "wife of John Andretti." The book also includes NASCAR references and historical data about the famous track.

As online recipes compete, home cooks remain devoted to their Junior League books. "I used to grab one wherever I traveled," Pippert says. "Because they're Junior League, the recipes stay fresh. Even family recipes are usually tweaked. So often, old cookbooks seem like they've been written by a bunch of old ladies. These books feel fresh and new and give me an exciting perspective on food." ❧

Vicki L. Friedman is an award-winning writer who spent 20 years at The Virginian-Pilot and a decade as an ESPN contributor. She is now a writer and digital media strategist for Consociate Media in Gloucester.