

## Amuse Bouche

### Baking Solo for the First Time

By: Hanna Griff-Sleven

At the end of January, after all the Christmas decorations were taken down, Waltham got dressed up for Valentine's Day. Hearts, roses and lace appeared in florists' windows and dress shops on Moody Street. When the decorations were completed, usually by the first week in February, my mother would take me in our brown Dodge Dart to inspect the handiwork; she and I shared a Valentine birthday. Grover Cronin's, Waltham's local department store, had four display windows whose mannequins were clothed in elegant eveningwear, with Valentine motifs as a backdrop, and tiny pink valentines scattered on the ground like cherry blossoms. Ma would turn to me and say, "You see this, this is all for us." I believed her. No one else I knew had this perfect day for a birthday.

I loved celebrating my birthday in school, there were valentine exchanges and I brought in pink and white valentine cupcakes to share with my classmates at snack time. But, in 1969, when I was in fourth grade there would be no class celebration; there had been a series of blizzards, and we hadn't gone to school for the past eight days. Snow drifts were everywhere, and cars covered in snow were parked in driveways—the town had all but shut down.

Mummy made us all go outside and play in the morning while she got some peace and did housework. Birthdays were not a big deal in my family; we got a cake and usually there was a family party with cousins and grandparents and aunts and uncles over on the weekend. This year, of course there would be just us 7 (my parents, my two older brothers and my younger sister and my grandmother—my *Bubbie*, who lived with us.) After lunch, my mother turned to me and said, "I think you're old enough to make our birthday cake.

I looked at her in amazement.

"Yes" she said, "as soon as we clean up from lunch, the kitchen is all yours." I had just gotten my first badge in Girl Scouts for cooking. We learned how to measure dry ingredients and wet ones, and to crack an egg on the side of the bowl so that no eggshells got in. Our final project was baking our own chocolate chip cookies from scratch. I also helped my mother when she baked, and knew she was impressed with how I organized all the ingredients for the recipe and how well I worked the white Sunbeam Mix Master very carefully, being careful to stop it when using a spatula to scrape the batter from the sides.

For a kitchen so rich in activity, it was small. There was a table for four with metal chairs that had swirly white plastic bottoms, and a counter with two high stools, one turquoise, one white for my sister and me. The appliances were on the wall opposite the table. We only ate lunch or breakfast in the kitchen since there was not enough room for us all. Usually, it was just us kids for breakfast. My mother oversaw the cereal and milk distribution but did not sit down to eat with us. My father was usually long gone, as he

would go and check in on his elderly aunts and uncles that lived together in another neighborhood close to our family business: Griff Furniture.

I put on one of Ma's aprons. I chose a cotton one with ruffles around the bib, white and pink, covered with hearts.

Ma, at 5'2," had curly dark hair in a halo around her head, big brown eyes and was curvy. She stood by the kitchen counter and watched me assemble the ingredients and measure. She opened the can of Hershey's syrup since the electric can opener was unwieldy. Then she left the room.

My brothers were outside playing with their gang of neighborhood friends, I could see them outside the kitchen window, making a snow fort. Lois, my younger sister was with her friend Ricky at his house making Creepy Crawlers. Ma went to the sun parlor to fold linen and watch her soap operas.

*Bubbie*, wearing a pink hairnet that covered her short, thin gray hair, and light woolen purple and white polka-dot housedress, her walker parked beside her, sat in the living room on the blue and green cloth armchair, reading her Yiddish newspaper with a magnifying glass.

As I creamed the butter and sugar and watched the batter turn light yellow, I remember feeling grown up. I added the vanilla, measuring it over the mixing bowl, remembering my mother telling me that spices and flavorings didn't have to be exact, a little extra made it taste better.

After I added the chocolate and poured the batter into the greased heart shaped aluminum pan, I called my mother in to light the gas oven. We put the cake pan in and my mother said, "Remember you have to clean up and get ready for the frosting." I washed the utensils and measuring cups and got everything ready for the fun part. The house started smelling like chocolate cake. *Bubbie* poked her head in the kitchen and nodded, "Smells like a birthday," she sang out.

Impatiently I waited for it to be done, and then cool. I called my best friend Barbie Sutherland to tell her I was making my own cake. She was properly impressed.

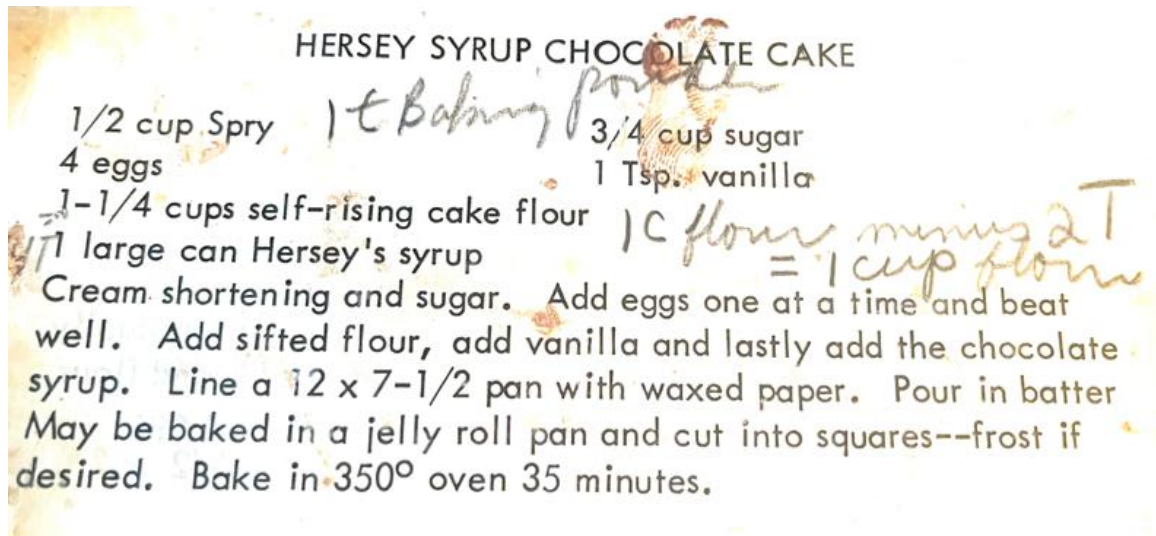
Finally, the cake was done and I made the frosting, deciding on a pale lavender background thinking that it would highlight all the jimmies and colored sprinkles and hearts I was going to use.

The cake was exactly as I thought it should be, loaded with color and fun and yummy.

When I brought the cake to the table for dessert, everyone chowed down appreciatively.

I hugged Mummy afterwards and thanked her for the best birthday present ever.

*This story is dedicated to the memory of my mother Bessie Griff who taught me to cook and bake and loved the way I wrote.*



*Image 1: Original Recipe, from the author*



*Images 2 & 3: Drawings by Stephanie Woytuk, used with permission*