



AT THE LIBRARY

By Julie Winkelstein
December 1, 2006

“I find the sweet flavor of broccoli blends perfectly with the rich taste of hoisin sauce. This sauce gives a good color and pleasant fragrance to the broccoli, but remember that a little goes a long way.”

-Ken Hom, “Stir-fried Broccoli with Hoisin Sauce”

My contributions to Thanksgiving this year were the turkey, biscuits, bread and what is known in my family as French Pastry Cake. The recipe for this cake is on an old index card and it is brief, to say the least. The ingredients are there and the oven temperature and that’s about it. And it ends with the words: “For icing, use Rombauer’s French Icing.”

For those of you who are familiar with *The Joy of Cooking*, you will recognize Rombauer as the original author. Unfortunately, my new copy of the book doesn’t include this recipe. My dad still has a 1945 and 1956 copy, though, and when I called him, he found the French Icing in both.

After our conversation I started thinking about the way this recipe and, in fact, many recipes are part of my family history. Some of them are on cards, but many are in old cookbooks that may or may not be in print anymore. It is easy to tell which books these are because they open naturally to

those many used places. There is nothing like soy sauce or melted chocolate for staining a page and making it stand out – or even fall out. I have several cookbooks that are simply piles of randomly arranged pages, held together only by the cover of the book. When I am looking for a particular recipe, I have to spread the pages out on the table and leaf through them. Reading it may be a problem, of course, because by the time the pages have fallen out, they are very very stained.

This is where library books come in handy. For instance, Ken Hom’s *Chinese Cookery* was for many years my favorite Chinese cookbook. This means the pages are now loose and, because they have sometimes glued themselves to each other, there are several recipes that are no longer completely legible. Fortunately, my library system owns it – although we are down to one copy – so I have been able to photocopy some of my favorite recipes and staple them to the original.

continued on page 2

A few years ago, I wrote a column about my resistance to writing in books. Cookbooks are the one exception to this - I write in my cookbooks all the time. I note corrections to the ingredients (e.g., use less salt), and the date and occasion I made it. I bake regularly for special library events and for the Library's two monthly poetry programs, and so some of my notes say things like: "1st Thursday poetry, September 7, 2006" or "Origami July 2006."

If I love the recipe, it will say "Great!" and if I hate it, "Don't use!" Over the years, these books have become not only my reliable source for good recipes, but also sort of a diary of my life. I have a few of my mother's old cookbooks and although the pages are stained - so I can easily tell which recipes she used - I find myself wishing she had written comments or thoughts, too. The closest she came are the lists that fall out of the book sometimes - lists of

familiar names that are apparently people to be invited to a party.

I treasure these because, as I look at the familiar writing, for a few minutes it is as if she is alive again, wearing her food-stained glasses and pulling her famous apple pie out of the oven, while the smell of turkey giblets and onions fills the house with Thanksgiving.