

Taking The Mystery Out Of Cooking

Vineyard Mystery Author, Wife, Pen Accessible Cookbook

by Debra Lawless

Be wary of any recipe over four inches long.” J.W. Jackson.

Foodies tend to divide cookbooks into two categories: those you cook from and those you don't. The eclectic recipes in “Delish!” (Vineyard Stories, 2006), a cookbook co-authored by Martha's Vineyard mystery writer Philip R. Craig and his wife Shirley Prada Craig, make you want to head into the kitchen and get to work.

“These recipes are real people cooking real food, that's their charm,” says Jan Pogue, president of Vineyard Stories, a new independent publisher on Martha's Vineyard. The Craigs were traveling in Turkey last week--perhaps collecting more recipes-- and unavailable. Pogue, reached on her cell phone on Martha's Vineyard, talked about “Delish!” The cookbook is the second book off the press she and her husband John Walter founded. “They're useable recipes. That's what attracted us.”

Fans of Craig's 19 mysteries set on Martha's Vineyard and featuring former Boston cop J.W. Jackson will not be surprised that the Craigs have now published a cookbook. The fictional J.W. and his wife Zee, perhaps the Craigs' alter egos, are excellent cooks. Their specialties, like the Craigs', are fish and shellfish dishes, homegrown vegetables, and breads.

Mystery fans may recall another gourmet detective, Nero Wolfe, whose live-in chef, Fritz, cooked up some mighty feasts. In 1973 Rex Stout published “The Nero Wolfe Cookbook” with oddball dishes such as Shad-Roe Mousse Pocahontas and Civet de Lapin. Although both cookbooks, punctuated with quotes from the books, make fun reading for the series' fans, that is where similarities end.

“Real people look in their refrigerator and they say, ‘this is what I have,’” Pogue says. “Sometimes you get tired of omelets and want something fancier.”

The cookbook is divided into 11 of the usual categories: Breakfasts and Brunches; Hors d'Oeuvres; Soups and Chowders; Desserts, with menus

following. Recipes range from the plebian "Oven Fried Chicken" to the exotic "Brady's Thanksgiving Seaduck" and "Orange Venison Roast." India and Greece are represented in recipes such as Sarofimian Bhajji (fried eggplant) and Tzatziki (a cucumber appetizer). Yet the book is not snobbish --- the occasional packet of onion soup mix, odd can of cream of mushroom soup and "Wishbone Russian Dressing (the red one)" creep in.

"The recipes have been used over and over and in some cases modified," Pogue says. "None of them are written in stone." Because the recipes are all family favorites that are known to "work," Vineyard Stories did not need to hire a professional kitchen tester.

The Craigs married in 1957, and have been seriously collecting recipes for the past 25 years or so. By now these recipes are in a spiral bound notebook they stow in a kitchen drawer. Their "homey" kitchen, too, reflects their style.

"Their house was an old fishing camp that had no bathrooms and no running water for years. They summered there," Pogue says. "Eventually, after they moved here year round, they brought in a modular unit and made a very simple home with a wonderful front porch that looks out at one of the Vineyard ponds. The house is filled with yard sale finds-- Phil and Shirley are addicted to yard sales-- and their kitchen is roomy enough for two cooks."

You may think that a published author would easily be able to get his cookbook published. Not so. When Craig took "Delish!" to Scribner, the publisher of his mysteries, it declined the cookbook. Pogue and her husband approached the Craigs at a local bookfair, saying, "I heard you have a cookbook," and their eyes lit up," Pogue says. "This has been a work of love for them."

In his preface to "Delish!" Craig traces his interest in cooking to a hankering for the white bread his mother baked on a woodstove on the ranch near Durango, Col., where he grew up. Although Craig learned to cook other dishes after that, he remains modest, writing that Shirley, a third generation islander, "remains, to this day, the principal and best cook in the house."

"Shirley's mother [Gen Prada] really was known on the Vineyard as quite a cook," Pogue says. "A lot of the Portuguese recipes were her mother's. The old timers all knew if she were cooking, they wanted to be there."

The cookbook created a one-year collaboration between Vineyard Stories and the Craigs. "It was extremely pleasurable up until the minute they had to proofread," Pogue says, laughing. "The vodka came out of the freezer. We all read this thing until our eyes crossed."

After all, in a recipe, the difference between a teaspoon and a tablespoon can be catastrophic.

The Pogues are giving independent stores a first crack at selling the book before they merchandise it nationwide through Barnes & Noble and Amazon sometime in mid-to-late December. If you want to give the book as a Christmas gift, you would be advised to buy it locally. "It has just zoomed out of the stores," Pogue says.

Meanwhile, remember the words of J.W. Jackson: "If you can read, you can cook." Delish!

Philip and Shirley Craig will sign "Delish!" at Where the Sidewalk Ends in Chatham on Wednesday, Nov. 22 at 3 p.m. They will also sign books Saturday, Dec. 2, at the Yellow Umbrella Bookstore, from 1 to 3 p.m. Also for sale will be the white bib apron that says "Delish! Martha's Vineyard" in red print.

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