

A Tasteful History



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ABOVE: Sierra Ryan and Jody Biergiel Colclough are researching recipes found in Ryan's great-grandmother's handwritten recipe cookbook dating from 1908. TOP: Jane Elizabeth 'Libbie' Pettit at 19.

DAN COYRO/SENTINEL

History
Santa Cruz women explore county's past through food and a handwritten recipe book dating back to 1908

By **DONNA JONES** djones@santacruzsentinel.com

WATSONVILLE — When Libbie Gilmour Pettit moved to Santa Cruz in 1919, she brought along the recipe book she'd started a decade earlier in Hanford.

More than 90 years later, local historian Frank Perry stumbled on the little volume crammed with handwritten notes and recipes clipped from the day's newspapers, and passed it onto his daughter and Pettit's great-granddaughter, Sierra Ryan.

Ryan, a wetlands researcher at Moss Landing Marine Labs, was delighted with the find, and she published a few of the recipes in a pamphlet as a gift for friends that Christmas. But she and friend Jody Biergiel Colclough hungered for more. What, they wondered, were the stories behind the recipes?

"The book that we wanted to read didn't exist yet so we decid-

ed we could do it," Ryan said.

That was the start of the Santa Cruz Heritage Food Project, a look at local history through the lens of food production, preparation and consumption.

Biergiel Colclough, director of handler certification at the nonprofit California Certified Organic Farmers, said they aim to write a history book that will appeal to foodies, teens and

young adults, dishing up a taste of their community's past in a light, but informative read.

"We want it to be entertaining," Biergiel Colclough said, "good cocktail party fodder."

INTO THE MIX

The pair has spent countless hours during the past year going

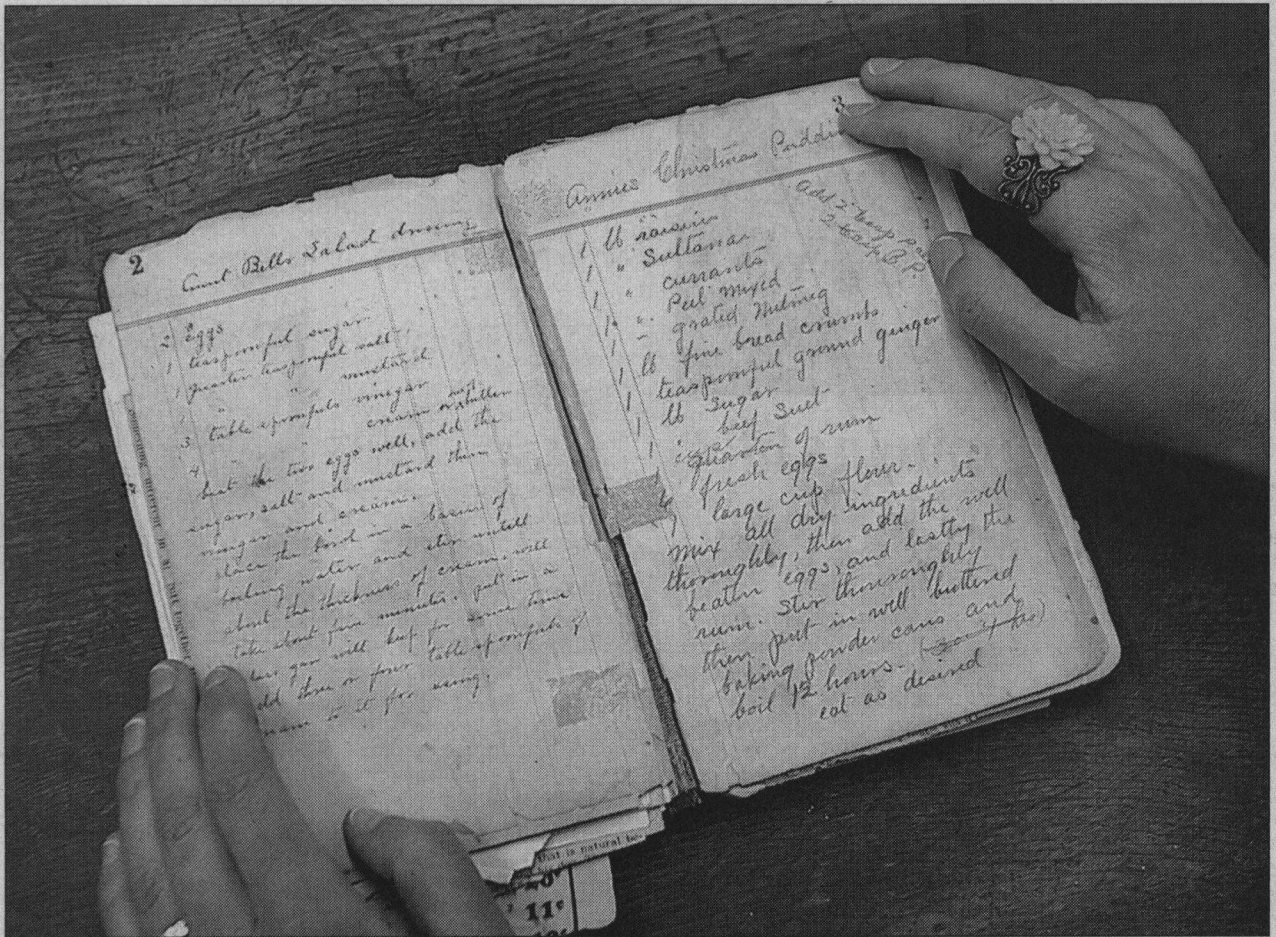
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APPLE CUSTARD

10-27-13
2/3 cup cooked apples
1 cup sugar
1 Tbsp. butter
1 tsp. nutmeg
1 Tbsp. lemon extract
2 eggs
2/3 cup milk

Beat the apple fine and free from lumps. Cream the butter and sugar, add the flavoring to the beaten yolks of eggs, and the milk and apple. Line a pie pan with a rich crust, fill with the custard and bake until firm. Beat the whites of eggs, add three teaspoonfuls sugar and pile lightly(sic) on the pie. Place in the over for a minute to make a delicate brown.

SOURCE: Libbie Gilmour Pettit's recipe book, started in 1909



DAN COYRO/SENTINEL

Many of the recipes found in the cookbook of Sierra Ryan's great-grandmother are handwritten, some dating from 1908.

RECIPES

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through the archives at the Agricultural History Project at the Santa Cruz County Fairgrounds and at the Pajaro Valley Historical Association. Now, they're turning to the community to spice up the book with family recipes and food-related anecdotes.

They've learned about the early production of wheat and sugar beets, the years when apple orchards covered the Pajaro Valley, the shifts to berries and lettuce. They're looking into dairy and poultry production, dry-farmed tomatoes, seafood, wine and grapes, beer and hops. What they're still trying to understand is how the farmers and the diverse communities in the county integrated local produce into their diets. What was on the seafood menus of Japanese and Italian immigrants, for example?

Ryan is especially hoping for a recipe using loganberries, the raspberry-blackberry hybrid whose creation in the late 1800s is credited to Judge John H. Logan of Santa Cruz.

RESEARCH SURPRISES

While Ryan and Biergiel Colclough each have

AT A GLANCE

SANTA CRUZ
HERITAGE FOOD
PROJECT

WHAT: An in-the-works book exploring local history through the lens of food
WHO: Brainchild of amateur historians Sierra Ryan and Jody Biergiel Colclough
WHEN: Anticipated publication in 2015
GET INVOLVED: Share family anecdotes and recipes related to local food
DETAILS: scheritagefoods.blogspot.com or SCHeritageFoods@gmail.com

advanced degrees, tackling historical research was new to both.

"We started from scratch, assuming (our audience) didn't know what was growing here," Ryan said.

Though she was born and raised in Live Oak, Ryan discovered there was a lot she didn't know as well. Some topics that have been fairly well-researched were news to her, such as the festive Apple Annals that drew massive crowds to Watsonville in the early 20th century.

"I found that charming, 30,000 to 40,000 people connecting to a product grown



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Percy H. and Jane Elizabeth 'Libbie' Pettit in their 1909 wedding photo.

here," Ryan said.

Their efforts have turned up some more obscure stories, too, like a 1934 artichoke racketeering scandal. After New York City shopkeepers were threatened and beaten by members of a syndicate attempting to double the price of the tasty thistle, Mayor Fiorello La Guardia banned artichokes produced in Santa Cruz and Monterey counties.

The women look to publish in 2015, and said they didn't

want to give away too much before then. But, they said, so many stories have emerged, their biggest challenge has been to stay focused on the initial topic. They said there will be plenty of leftovers for the next person or group who comes to the table with an interest.

"Hopefully, we'll inspire other people," Ryan said.

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