There are some memories that are deeper than thought.

I was walking by the shelves at William’s Produce in Lenoir when the sight of a bag of apples stopped my steps. The apples were pale green with a thin skin that was hazy with white wax. Some of them had small brown spots from where they had been handled. There was something familiar about them, even though I couldn’t put a name to them. I knew in that moment that I would buy those apples because I had seen them before. I’d eaten them before.

I asked the owner what they were called.

“June apples,” he replied.

“But it’s July,” I observed.

“I know, but June apples come in during the first weeks of July.”

( I love the dialog at the beginning – reminds me a bit of Barbara Kingsolver’s style – do you read her a lot? Your use of first person and short thoughts followed by longer ones also reminds me of her writing.)

I took the apples home. After a quick wash and taste, I decided that their workhorse use would be as cooked apples. I liked them raw, but they were tart – much too much for most folks. I knew this anyway. I had an idea that these were apples to be cooked when I was looking at them at Williams. When I peeled them I noticed that the skin was very thin and delicate and that the light green color of the peelings tinted the flesh. Later, I would learn the name for these apples – Lodi. And an extension agent from Wilkes County horrified me by saying he feared they might be an endangered species. But in that moment in Williams , I wasn’t doing anything but acting on impulse – one I would later be grateful I had indulged.

When I put the peeled apples over heat, they cooked down quickly into a thick sauce. I sugared them, tasted and then sugared them again. They were tart – definitely cooking apples. As I tasted the sauce, it came back to me. These apples had been on the bar in my grandmother’s kitchen. I don’t have any specific memory of them sitting there, but they must have because these were the apples that she used when she made fried pies.

When I say fried pie, the apple part is understood. Grandmother didn’t mess around with any other fruit in her fried pies. It was always apple. I’ve seen other fillings in stores, and I came across a recipe for blackberry fried pies the other day in a magazine. But it’s been my experience that apple is the best filling and the one of choice in the South. Not that the traditional filling has kept me from experimenting. I’ve been seduced by the sweet, juicy decadence of peaches. Cooked down to a thick jammy consistency, I’ve put them in fried pies. August’s bumper crop of blueberries induced me to try them in fried pies once. But somehow nothing else is as good – no other fruit satisfies like the apple.

When I think of fried pies, I remember my Grandmother’s big kitchen. When anyone stepped through the side door from the parking lot (a leftover from a fish camp that the family had operated until it burned to the ground), a little metal bell would ring. It was pinned to the door by a short piece of string and a thumbtack. Once, when the bathroom light string broke, the bell was moved in there as a fix. The door bell string didn’t last long in the bathroom. Every time someone would turn on the light in the bathroom everyone would look at the kitchen door, and then realizing the mistake, down the hall to the bathroom.

That kind of scrutiny in a one bathroom house made it necessary to move the bell back to the door where it belonged. The bell announced my visits and that of everyone else who entered that big kitchen through the side door. I can picture that kitchen now as it was when I was a child. Grandmother is at the stove stirring some steaming pot and ordering people about. She has someone setting the table, someone else making tea and someone watching the biscuits in the oven. (this transition needs work here. Indeed it needs a transition of some sort.) One of my favorite sounds in her kitchen was the sound of biscuit dough hitting hot oil in a big pan when she made fried pies.

This woman, who influenced so much about the cook I have become today, was my father’s mother. She was a fiery woman with strawberry hair, a loud quick laugh and an equally quick temper. The preacher at her funeral talked about how she had raised four children and worked in the mill. He mentioned that she had loved all children and then he finished up by talking about what a good cook she was and how much he had enjoyed eating at her table.

Once those apples from Williams had dredged up all these memories, I had to make fried pies. I made homemade biscuit dough and rolled it out thin, spooned on some apples and folded and crimped them. While I was frying the pies, the smells of my grandmother’s kitchen filled my kitchen. – hot cast iron and shimmering oil, browned flour and the sweet smell escaped filling that sizzled in the pan.

As they finished frying, I layered pies on plates lined with paper towels, leaving them in a single layer, so they wouldn’t get soggy. That is one of the differences between the way that I cook them and the way my grandmother did. She could fry 20 and not worry about them getting soggy. As a matter of fact, some grownup would referee the plate as the pies came off the stove to make sure the grownups all got one and so did the children before anyone dared take a second pie.

My memories of family gatherings at Grandmother’s center around food, and so the setting is always her big kitchen. ( I also remember family gatherings – my grandma cooked very basic southern food – skillet fried chicken with gravy, fried ham and gravy, applesauce, banana pudding, pound cake, cocoanut cake, green beans, lima beans….. I am making myself very hungry!) When I say big, I mean it. The kitchen was added onto the side of the house, so she got exactly the kitchen she wanted. The counters were comfortable for her to work on which meant other adults had to bend over to use them. In the center, there was a long, high bar with stools where the family took its meals. At the end of the bar was a table that caught odds and ends and served as the kid’s table when there was a crowd. There was a double sink, a stove, a refrigerator, an upright freezer, a console television, a coat corner, a sideboard, a three-cushion sofa and some wall cabinets for storing dishes. None of this stuff was crammed together. There was enough space between the stove and the high bar for children to get underfoot and in the way. (great description – maybe some colors added or other senses like smells, textures etc.)

I learned a lot about cooking traditional Southern foods just from being in her kitchen while she was cooking. I sat at the high bar or on the sofa and just watched what was going on. It wasn’t like she was going to give me lessons. She was not a patient woman and often when we were there, she was cooking for 15 or more. It was more that I absorbed her techniques and became acquainted with the smells and the timing of the food she cooked.

Most often she did not cook from recipes. She cooked the recipes that lot of country Southern mothers and grandmothers cook – coleslaw, scratch biscuits, squirrel and dumplings, barbecued rabbit, turtle stew and frog legs. She was not, like some Southern cooks I know, above cooking with recipes. At the urging of someone, likely my aunt Judy, she once made a Baked Alaska from a recipe. By the time she had made the cake and assembled it, frozen it and then did that final dramatic baking, the end product was a disappointment. But perhaps it was because we had grown up on her homemade apple cake, hot biscuits with homemade blueberry jam, pound cake and blackberries with sugar swimming in cold milk. Those foods were really good and did not require the baking of cake, assembly of an elaborate nature, freezing and then baking. Grandmother pointed out that the desserts she had been making without a recipe were a lot less trouble and tasted better.

We ate food that was fresh picked and a lot of times home grown. Grandmother’s husband, a man we all called Grandaddy, was a gardener and orchard man at heart. He had three gardens on the property – the big garden, the lower garden and the side garden. Beets, corn, green beans, squash and cucumbers were raised in quantity in the rows. He also had planted all kinds of fruit trees. I learned the seasons and the signs for ripeness in blackheart cherries, red plums, apples, raspberries and muscadine grapes in that yard. If I learned to appreciate the techniques and timing of the cook in the kitchen, I came to love good fruit, picked when it was perfectly ripe out in the yard. (nice juxtaposition of garden and orchard)

I credit my grandparents from both sides with exposing me to garden vegetables and homegrown fruit for my good taste in produce.(Try this sentence by starting with “My good tast in produce…..) I say no thank you to cardboard peaches, mealy apples, sour plums and the worst of all – a wintertime tomato. I’d rather wait and get something worth eating than have a pale imitation just because the notion strikes sometime in January or February. ( I like this concept – no food before its time! Maybe this could be an underlying theme – understanding the cycles of food or having patience to wait for the season????)

Sometime after my Grandmother died, I got lonely for the sound of a door bell. We had a little Christmas tapestry that hung on the back door during the holiday season. In those weeks, I would get used to the sound of the bell announcing the comings and goings of the household. When we packed up all the decorations, I would miss it. So one year, I took a pair of scissors and snipped the bell off. A thumb tack and a short length of string, and I had myself a door bell. It still hangs there, announcing the comings and goings and reminding me of Grandmother.

One of the dishes that everyone at Grandmother’s really liked was squirrel and dumplings. The men of the family would go hunting and bring her a mess of squirrels, dressed and ready for the pot. She would stew them and then make the dumplings that thickened the stock into gravy. The children would set the table and then someone would carry that big steaming pot over from the stove. Everyone would dig in, but there was one thing in the pot that we all knew to avoid. No one but Grandmother got a squirrel head. Grandchild or not – she’d fork you in a heartbeat if you went for one of the squirrel heads. ( I love this sentence!)

There was only one thing from the wild that I ever saw my Grandmother refuse to cook . Reptile turtles bothered her not one whit. Rodent squirrels went right into the stew pot. She had cooked possum – not in my lifetime; they were eating higher on the hog by then. Deer, bear, rabbit and frogs came to the table in her house. But the day my uncle, Marvin, brought a big rattlesnake that he had killed up on Hibriten Mountain, she set her foot down firmly and would not budge. She told him in no uncertain terms that she was not going to bring that symbol of Satan into her kitchen. She didn’t care that he had already dressed it. She told him he could cook it outside on the backyard fireplace if he wanted. He didn’t want to taste rattlesnake bad enough for that.

It was my Grandmother that I thought of one day at work at the newspaper office. My female coworkers were taking me to task because I had admitted that I liked to cook for my husband. It started when they inquired about the origin of my clearly home-cooked leftover lunch in the breakroom. They were horrified that I took pleasure in a domestic art. They lectured me about Women’s Sufferage and equal rights and the feminist cause.

I thought of the pleasure that I got from cooking for my husband. I thought of my Grandmother and how she put really good food on the table for 15 or 20 people and then beamed as they ate, savored and praised her cooking. I looked my female coworkers right in the eyes and refused to repent my views. I had matured enough by then to realize that I wasn’t going to change their minds, but I wasn’t going to apologize for something that I loved to do.

That I love to cook is a constant source of puzzlement to my mother and my Granny.

Pick just about any day and step through living room in my mother’s house and walk under the arched doorway into the kitchen, and like as not my mother will be heating up a can of soup. On really ambitious days, she will pair it with a grilled cheese. My mother hates to cook. Once my sister told my mother that the pair of them cooked in the primitive wilderness. My sister had been over to my house, and we’d cooked a quick meal together. My sister had marveled first at the assortment of condiments in my refrigerator and then at my collection of cooking tools. My mother gets her hatred of cooking honest. It came to her straight from her own mother. This is a woman we all call Granny. She turned 89 (we think) at the end of June in 2010. There is some uncertainty about her age. She was embarrassed because she was older than her husband, so she lied about her age for years. When she went to apply for Social Security and Medicare after she retired, the government told her she was not old enough. Seems she had lied on her employment records as well. So my mother set about getting all this straightened out. Several weeks and a lot of frustrated phone calls later, it was determined that there was no official record of my Granny’s birth. The family had saved no copy, and the courthouse in West Virginia where it was originally recorded had burned to the ground. The government ended up accepting the record of my Granny’s birth that was recorded in the Johnson family Bible. That date would mean that Granny is 89 if the person who recorded it so long ago got it straight.

My Granny has cooked, and hated it all her life. She is one of the older of a family that had 10 children. She kept house and cooked for others before she married, and she fed a husband and raised two kids. After I got married, my husband and I planted a garden and the end result of that is preserving. I learned to can, from my mother-in-law and from books. I still can food. My husband and I put up cherry jam, homemade tomato sauce, pickled beets and homemade relishes. Granny regards my passion for cooking with suspicion. On more than one occasion she has asked me with a tone of disbelief, “So you really don’t mind cooking?” After my grandfather died, my mother and I worried that Granny would exist only on bologna sandwiches, and I believe this may be the case. She cooked only to feed her children, her husband and then her grandchildren. Without Grandpa to cook for every day, I knew she would give up hot meals.

To be honest, she is not a very good cook overall, but she had a few dishes that she cooked very well and that were very good. ( maybe tasty or another adjective instead of just “very good.?”)One dish that comes to mind is soupy potatoes. When I entered her kitchen from the door on the carport and smelled steaming potatoes and butter, I knew we were going to be eating good. Soupy potatoes are simply Irish or russet potatoes cut into large chunks and simmered in salted water until they release some of their starches to make a silky thick kind of potato gravy. Add a generous portion of butter or margarine, and soupy potatoes are ready to serve. I remember being delighted if I would come back to the bar in Granny’s kitchen and find some soupy potatoes left in the pot after everyone had made a first plate.

The other food that my granny does very well is green beans – Southern style. These are beans that are slicked with a generous portion of fatback and cooked until there is no chewing required. These are the beans that have given the South a reputation for cooking vegetables to death. To be sure, Southerners have earned this reputation when it comes to green beans, all winter greens and cooked cabbage. If one had grown up eating lightly steamed green beans with a lemon almondine sauce, then Southern green beans would be a shock.

But I love my Granny’s green beans. She has a knack for cooking them until they are dry. She puts on the beans with a lot of water and the fat back and brings them to a rolling boil. Then she cooks them for another hour or more, turning them down as they cook. By the time she’s done, the beans are mostly dry and very tender. Ladled onto a plate with a fried pork chop and soupy potatoes, and that is a supper fit for a king.

So every day when I step through the wide-framed open doorway from the dining room into my kitchen, I bring all these memories with their tastes and scents and emotions clinging to them. The three women who cooked for me as a child have influenced the cook that I have become. As I have explored food as a writer, I have come to appreciate many of the things that my grandparents did for me when I was a child. My grandparents on both sides grew huge gardens. I learned early to appreciate the crunch of fat white cucumbers, and the sweetness of an unblemished yellow squash.

I remember walking to the garden with a paring knife and a salt shaker in the company of my Grandpa to pick tomatoes and pull spring onions. The knife was so the onions could be trimmed right there in the garden. The salt shaker was so the tomato could be salted after that first bite opened up its juicy inside. It was this practice remembered that showed me the universality of food and its place in memory and life. I was watching Jacques Pepin on television one day. Pepin is an honest-to-goodness French chef. He was chef to Charles de Gaul. He came to America and was the head chef for Howard Johnson and then became a television chef. He was a good friend to Julia Child, and they did several television series together. He lives in Connecticut with his American wife and their dogs. The day he rocked my world was when I heard him talking about walking out to the garden with his dog and a salt shaker to pick a tomato and eat it. Pepin mentioned how much richer and more flavorful the tomatoes were when they were eaten right in the garden, having been warmed by the sun.

I had done that exact thing. Aside from a love of food, Pepin and I shared little. He is rich; I am not. He has his own television show; I do not. But we shared this practice, this memory, this knowledge of the richness of food and the delight in the freshest and best flavor of a sun-warmed tomato right in the garden rows. ( This is a terrific paragraph – I love the phrasing and comparisons and the memory!)

When I read our modern food evangelists talk about food miles, cooperative farms and the quality and freshness of local food, I realize that I was living that life before they discovered it. My mother’s parents drove us to Alexander County and let us fill buckets full of apples at a pick-your-own orchard. Those apples, varieties like Brushy Mountain Limbertwig, Arkansas Black, Jonathan and Winesap, were ripened on the tree, and much better than anything from a grocery store. The smell of an apple house takes my breath away with the memories of childhood. There is just something comforting about the sharp, sweet smell of apples in quantity. ( I took my children to the orchards every late summer and fall and we picked apples, sipped cider with doughnuts and hiked around to find as many varieties as possible).

My Grandaddy taught me that sweet corn must be handled with care. He picked silver queen corn ears right out of his garden before it was cooked, and we all pitched into to shuck and silk it so it could go in the pot. He would head down to the garden to pick the corn when the big pot filled with water was on the stove. Now, I know the science behind that practice. When the corn is picked, the sugars in it immediately begin to convert to starch. Sugar is sweet; starch is not. So the longer the corn goes from picking to cooking, the less sugar it contains. ( I didn’t know why but I also helped my grandpa pick corn and take it in for dinner – it always went into the pot just before we ate!)

This love of food and the growing of it, picking it and preparing it at the peak of quality and freshness has been a gift to me. The traditional recipes that bring back sweet memories of relatives gone but not forgotten are treasures. I love to bake Grandmother’s Apple Cake – heavy with fresh fruit and studded with walnuts. The recipe that my mother copied off in her hand will be one of my treasured possessions. For now, I bake this cake from a card where I copied off that recipe. It has become a winter tradition in my family. I bake this cake after we return from the orchards in Alexander County, the backs of our car carrying bags and boxes of fruit that perfume the passenger compartment. These food memories strike a chord in me deeper than thought and taste and memory. When I break out a jar of pickled beets for our table, I often think of Grandmother. She put up pickled beets to serve with winter’s pintos and cornbread. And it was at her table that I tasted and came to love their ruby color and earthy flavor. She stored all her canned goods below the house. I remember heading down to her cellar basement to find jars of beets. The jars of preserved food were lined up on rough board shelves – waiting for the time in the winter when they could be pulled out and give us a taste of a season now past. ( This is another memory I share with you – I love what you have here – maybe some more about the preparation, canning and harvesting but you have a great memoir here and are preserving something very special!)