

Polk's baked goods are an Oktoc favorite

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As the daughter of a home economist, Hellen Polk grew up “helping” in the kitchen and in the garden.

Her mother, Lillian Hicks, was a home economist for TVA in Tupelo. Polk said her mom was very organized with meal preparation and cooked large recipes on the weekends that could be used during the week or frozen for later.

“She was an exceptional cook and was well known for her cooking demonstrations as well as kitchen design and lighting,” Polk said.

“Many of her meals incorporated casseroles and one-dish foods that she could serve with salads. Her meals were very healthy and tasty.”

Many of the casserole and soup recipes that Polk uses today are ones that were prepared by her mom.

“I tend to cook in quantity as well, so I like recipes that make a lot, and can be frozen,” Polk said. “Chicken Rotel and Kentucky Burgoo are two great dishes she prepared often. My father loved anything that my mother cooked, but he thought my oyster dressing was the best!”

One of her current culinary inspirations can be found in the garden.

“I am really trying to incorporate fresh herbs in my cooking, and I have enjoyed trying my hand at growing a variety of them,” Polk said. “The taste of fresh herbs enhances so many dishes, and they also help in cutting down on the use of salt.”

Polk said supper club, tailgate friends, church and club activities give her the opportunity to share different dishes.

But her family loves tried and true favorites. Polk’s husband, Carlton, loves her seafood gumbo. Growing up, her son Parker always requested her homemade chicken and noodles.

Family friend Robin Pigg said Polk is a “wonderful cook and extremely talented.”

Another good friend, Judy Smith said she always looks forward to visits at Hellen’s.

“She, without fail, can effortlessly pull something out from the refrigerator or the oven that really hits the spot,” Smith said. “The very first time I was in her home, she offered homemade pimiento cheese spread, which I believe may be the best I have ever had. She is marvelous at everything she does, but her talent in the kitchen is exceptional. Whatever the occasion, Hellen’s hospitality shines...for sooner or later, we end up sharing something delicious together!”

Smith said Polk is happy to share her recipes, which she appreciates since she is always looking for special Southern dishes to share with family.

While everyone loves to sit at Polk’s table for a meal, they truly want to stay for dessert. It is her grandmother who may have had the

greatest culinary influence on Polk, to everyone's delight.

"(She) was the baker in our family," Polk said. "My earliest memories of her kitchen included delicious cakes and pies made from 'scratch,' and my favorite, homemade chocolate candy — much to Mama's shagrin!"

Polk still has two of her grandmother's handwritten books of recipes where she noted special dates, menus and guests.

"Many of my dessert recipes were hers," Polk said. "I love to take cookies and cakes to events so that they don't tempt me at home. The caramel and coconut layer cakes are really great and fairly easy to prepare. Gingersnaps, lemon squares, and cranberry-white chocolate chip cookies go over very well."

Polk is one of the ladies of Oktoc who will prepare a variety of baked treats at the annual Oktoc Country Store, set for 10 a.m. Oct. 22 at the Oktoc Community Center. She said the day before the Oktoc Country Store, her kitchen looks like an explosion of flour, powdered sugar, and dirty dishes. But since she has retired from Starkville Academy, she is trying to pace herself a little better.

One of Polk's most popular baked treats at the Oktoc Country Store is her pumpkin bread, baked in old Folder's coffee cans.

"I hesitate to admit this, but her pumpkin bread that she bakes each fall for the Oktoc Country Store may actually be better than mine, even though I am pretty sure we use the exact same recipe — her baking the loaves in coffee cans makes the bread evenly moist, and it slices beautifully," Smith said.

Polk said she typically prepares about a dozen loaves of pumpkin bread, and then as many cakes and pies as time allows.

"I don't do exactly the same things every year," Polk said. "The baked goods are great sellers, so I usually fix some of the items that sold well or things that were requested that we did not have the previous year."

Polk serves as this year's president of the Oktoc Garden Club that hosts the Oktoc Country Store each year. As part of the annual fundraiser, the Garden Club has put together cookbooks to showcase some of food, history and heritage of the Oktoc Community. Polk said Margaret Kennard taught several of the Oktoc 'newcomers' to make her caramel icing and other great Oktoc cooks share their expertise and favorite recipes through the five cookbooks that have been published over the years by the Oktoc Garden Club and sold each year at the Oktoc Country Store.

"This is such a great event to share all the good foods and experience of living in Oktoc," Polk said.