

The History of Jell-O

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On the ancient food-smear pages of the Tanner cookbook library—which belonged mostly to the women of my family, there are tried and tested recipes featuring Jell-O. Jell-O was one of the many ingredients that brought family and friends together. Family reunions and holidays featured Aunt Beccy’s Strawberry Pretzel Dessert; Ruth Emily’s Lime-Cottage Cheese-Jell-O dish; and Ava’s Mandarin Orange and Pineapple Jell-O Delight along with her molded shrimp-infused tomato aspic. Oh sure, there were other foods from the farm – turkey, beef, tomatoes, stuffing, gravy, casseroles and more. But nothing said love as much as J-E-L-L-O. My hunch is you also remember the dishes. Comfort in a spoon. At funerals, CorningWare dishes came with family, friends and neighbors. You guessed it. Along came Jell-O.

Jell-O has become almost synonymous for any food wiggly. According to the website “What’s Cooking America.net,” the first reference to gelatin dates back to 1682 when a Frenchman, Denis Papin, wrote of his experiments of boiling animal bones and the glutinous material that came from it. During the Napoleonic wars, the French used it as a source of protein. But it wouldn’t be until 1895 when Pearl B. Wait, a New York cough-syrup manufacturer and his wife, May, discovered a way to inexpensively add syrups to the protein powder -- that when water was added could be used to make aspics, molds and desserts. The Walts reportedly lacked the finances to successfully market their product and sold the Jell-O formula to their neighbor, Orator Francis Woodward. By the turn of the 20th century, Jell-O was gaining fame and becoming the go-to ingredient in American kitchens. All that is to say, I’m a fourth-generation Kansan who will testify that local church and 4-H potlucks had tables that literally bulged with Jell-O products. In St. John, there was Norma Long’s Rhubarb Jell-O – 20 ounces of frozen rhubarb, 1 cup of sugar, 2 cups water, 2 3-ounce packages of wild strawberry Jell-O. Cook rhubarb, sugar and water. Add Jell-O. May top with cream cheese softened with milk. Don’t forget to sprinkle with broken pecans.

From my mother’s Clovia Cookbook, the sorority she belonged to when she attended Kansas State University in the 1940s, was this recipe from Lorraine Corke Lacey for Cheesecake – 1 pkg. crushed graham crackers, ¼ cup melted oleo, ¼ cup sugar. Filling – ½ pint whipping cream, 1 package lemon Jell-O, 1 cup boiling water, 8 ounces cream cheese, ½ cup sugar, 1 teaspoon vanilla. Mix crackers, oleo and sugar. Put more than half in bottom of dish. Save some for topping. For the filling, add boiling water to the Jell-O. Cool. Then, use ½ cup whipped cream and whip it the with cream cheese until smooth. Add the rest of the ingredients. Put crumbs on top. Chill. My mother noted on the recipe, it was “Good.”

Native Kansan Clementine Paddleford, who became one of the nation’s best-known food writers during the first half of 20th century, wrote that “We all have hometown appetites. Every other person is a bundle of longing for the simplicities of good taste once enjoyed on the farm or in the hometown left behind.” Isn’t it amazing how many generations of memories come with Jell-O? Now, pass me Grandma’s Sunshine Jell-O Salad. You know the one – with shredded carrots and crushed pineapple.

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