Simple 'Tables of Content'

Sleek, sophisticated look of latest cookbook by The Junior League of Birmingham is filled with easy-does-it ideas, fit for cooks at any level

Wednesday, January 31, 2007

JO ELLEN O'HARA
News staff writer

New cookbooks usually reflect the way people are currently cooking, especially books that originate in a community.

That describes the newest book, published last fall by The Junior League of Birmingham. With its spectacular cover that shows the city from the crest of Red Mountain, with a perfectly set outdoor table in the foreground, a reader’s first impression might be the contents are sophisticated, involved, only for the serious gourmet.

Now remember that a book that originates in Birmingham, by The Junior League of Birmingham, probably was put together by real cooks - people who spend real time in the kitchen.

Remember, too, that cooks today have so many things on their lifestyle plates, when it comes to dinner, they are looking for good and easy. Even when entertaining, they are always on the lookout for something that tastes and looks spectacular but hides secrets such as: can be made a day ahead, freezes well. (Cooks know what to look for.)

"Tables of Content" is filled with surprisingly simple, appetizing recipes. Most are family friendly; some are special occasion; the people-pleasing factor is in the book from cover to cover.

Apparently, the book has been a hit with cooks. Since the book came out some six months ago, more than 20,000 copies of "Tables of Content" have been sold. According to a Junior League spokesperson, "we were able to pay the full cost to publish `TOC' in the same month the book was released (October), as opposed to paying over the two-three year time frame we had projected ..."

A Christmas hit

"Tables of Content" was under a lot of Christmas trees this past season, and one woman found not one, but six "Tables" under her tree. It was not unusual for people known to enjoy cooking and cookbooks to receive more than one copy of the book.

As one reader suggested, this would be an easy item for regifting.

The strong Birmingham connection also made it an appealing gift to people who call this city home but no longer live here. It was probably a popular wedding gift as well.

With the many people who contributed recipes to the book (with their names attached to the recipes), giving a book to a friend was a great gift idea for any occasion.

The membership, however, didn't stop with friends and family marketing. They made sales trips to Baton...
Rouge; Jackson, Miss.; Knoxville; Memphis; and Tuscaloosa, to spread the word about the new book.

At the Junior League Market here last October, some $17,000 came from sales of the new book. And on a day in December, 25 retail orders were placed through the Internet.

**Other books**

"Magic," a spiral-bound book, was published by The Junior League of Birmingham in 1982, and since that time, more than 66,000 books have been sold, which shows its lasting quality.

In the early ’90s, "Food for Thought" was a hard-cover book of the JLB that reflected cooks’ more serious endeavors in the kitchen. Around that time, cooks were spending more time in the kitchen, and enjoying it.

"Food For Thought, now in its third printing, has sold more than 58,000 copies.

**Cooks behind books**

In all three books, recipes were not simply submitted and printed.

After screening, recipes were chosen for various categories. The teams of recipe testers - all from the Junior League membership - got in their kitchens and tried the recipes for accuracy and flavor appeal. Recipes were retested and often rewritten for clarity.

When the recipes were ready for print and the photographs completed, they were turned over to Favorite Recipes Press, a major publisher of cookbooks. For five consecutive weeks after "Table of Contents" was released, the book held the No. 1 spot as the top-selling cookbook. It still remains in the top 10.

The predominant photographs in the book are those of landmarks in the city, such as Vulcan, Sloss Furnaces, Sixteenth Street Baptist Church, Birmingham Botanical Gardens among them. Photographs of recipes included in the book are in color.

**Where funds go**

The Junior League, which began here in 1922 with 131 charter members, now has more than 2,700.

Projects of the league are all geared toward this community, such as increasing literacy, improving health care, curbing domestic violence, ensuring better child care and reducing homelessness. The projects, which are all aided by funding from such projects as cookbooks, also involve the membership spending many hours of community service.

As an example of the funds contributed, in 2004-2005, the Junior League invested $932,105 in the community.

**More on 'Tables'**

"Tables of Content," like many cookbooks, is divided into categories: breakfast and brunch, appetizers and beverages, salads, pasta, breads and grains, soups and stews, main dishes, vegetables and desserts.

Soups, as an example, range from something special for cold weather, such as chili, to a summer perfect cold peach soup.

That everything old is new again is exemplified by a recipe for copper pennies, a cold salad or condiment that first became popular in the 1970s, and is back for another century of enjoyment. A recipe called Pepper Place Vegetable Salad reflects a recipe made popular by the summer market on Southside.

Ever-popular comfort food meat loaf is in the book, along with a sophisticated sounding, yet five-ingredient recipe for marinated lamb chops.