

## Making Mama's Pie

---

**Sandra Y. Govan** retired from the English Department at UNC Charlotte. Professor Emerita, she works on both scholarly projects and on personal projects such as developing her poetic voice while polishing her penchant for creative non-fiction or “factions.” Govan is a founding member of the Wintergreen Women Writer’s Collective. She has pieces published in *Shaping Memories: Reflections of African American Women Writers*, *My Soul is a Witness*, *Father Songs*, and *Erotique Noire*.

---

Nobody, not Ms. Ada, not Mama Kay, not Iceman’s mom, not even my cousins C.J. or Yolanda make sweet-potato pie like my Mama’s. I know because I am a connoisseur of potato pie—a holiday treat not to be confused with the mundane pumpkin. No pineapple, walnuts, or streusel; neither a dollop of Cool Whip nor a scoop of ice cream is required to enhance a good, warm, sweet-potato pie.

After years of trial and effort—and I do mean trial—I can come extremely close when I bake but it’s still not exactly my Mama’s pie. Like my mother, I don’t eyeball or pinch when measuring—“a pinch, just a pinch” of sugar or salt, nutmeg or cinnamon won’t do. My mother had a degree in Home Economics from Southern. She worked for the Chicago Board of Education as a high-school cafeteria manager; in that capacity she cooked and

measured out ingredients that entered the dishes of hundreds of students and teachers five days a week, forty weeks a year, for over thirty years. Long ago she observed, during her stint at The Board, the facts of life doctors and dieticians warn about now. Mama was way ahead of her time in forecasting the oncoming obesity epidemic. Reflecting on teachers “parading,” as she said, through her cafeteria lines, Mama repeatedly noted in disapproving disgust, “You can’t heap your plate to over-flowing then balance the load with a diet soda!”

On those occasions when she chose to teach me, her dreamy wayward child, how to measure precisely and why we did so, we sat in Mama’s domain. She would hold forth in the tiny yellow kitchen with its high dark cabinets, a deep double-sink but no counter-space, and only her kitchen table as working space.

Our kitchen really belonged to Mama. Daddy, who worked a split shift for the CTA, mostly cooked Saturday morning biscuits (with “soufflé Govan”) and maybe made Sunday morning pancakes before we headed to Sunday school. But largely, like the rest of us, Daddy, my brother, and I came to the kitchen to eat and wash dishes. Cooking, cleaning, and everything else connected to kitchens remained in Mama’s hands. Unlike most girls my age, I was never even asked to sweep up the kitchen or mop the floor!

Mama could do housework better, faster, and more efficiently by herself. She put in the pink kitchen floor tiles alone. And finally, after tiring of both the color and the work to keep her walls tidy, she changed the yellow paint around the stove area to a small light pink and white tile, making her kitchen walls so much easier to wipe down for cleaning. A three-tiered yellow rolling cart stood in the kitchen’s far left corner holding Mama’s essential tools—her Sunbeam stand mixer, the non-coated waffle iron, a rounded gun-metal gray cookie jar, a percolator, and assorted sharp knives. In the far right corner stood the flimsy three-drawer pasteboard cabinet which held her precious cookbooks — *The Illustrated Betty*

*Crocker, The Better Homes and Gardens* (also illustrated) and the scads of loose recipes clipped regularly from the Sun-Times or the Tribune. In a rare patient moment, while sitting with one leg folded under her hip in her chair, Mama instructed me again about the importance of precise measurements, especially when baking.

“Every ingredient, Sweetie, has its purpose,” she’d say. Then she’d stress, perhaps suspecting my attention of wandering, “Exact measurements are much more important for a beginner.” The intuitive “handful” of flour (rather than a cup) and the “dash of this or pinch of that” method used by some by some adults would not, she thought, work well for a daughter with small hands, limited ability, and, we confess, less interest. I generally preferred to be outside playing with friends or riding my bike. When inside, I’d hide in my room, buried in the pages of comic book or a novel—any novel.

But sometimes, especially after I grew up some and went off to school, coming home to watch the creation-of-pie process commanded my complete attention. Not apple, nor peach, nor berry (although she made all of these well), but the making of my Mama’s sweet-potato pie.

Nowadays, the pie I make comes not from the *Ebony Cookbook* nor the *Isaac Hayes Cookbook*—though I do consult these sources to get my “proportions” right before I commence to modify—’cause my Mama said that once you learn the basics, a good cook is entitled to “modify” to taste. My pies flow largely from memory.

However, I learned the hard way that the contemporary ceramic pie pans on the market today are larger than Mama’s aluminum pie plates. The size difference makes it a tad more challenging to adjust proportions accurately because it’s hard to find the eight or nine-inch pies that the recipe books all specify. We are, forced, therefore, to bake ten or twelve-inch television pies! That measly one or two inch difference affects the amount of sugar, shortening, or liquid the pie requires. The upward movement of both cookware and proportion size seems perfectly in keeping with the bigger-is-better philosophy that governs the American food industry.

Once, while tooling around Charlotte and listening to an NPR piece on stimulating memory, my Honey and I talked about recollection, what best evokes it—a sound, a smell, a taste. When I’m in baking mode, it is a glance and a texture that I note more than anything else. I taste only after the texture looks about right. When making sweet-potato pie, I measure all ingredients first—mash, stir in, beat with eggs and appropriate liquids—until I get the look, and then the feel and taste I recall. I do my best to imitate Mama’s pies.

My Mama’s pies were more burnt orange or umber in color rather than nutty brown. Her filling completely filled the pie shells and rose up, staying high and firm, rather than collapsing inward after baking. Nor did her piecrusts ever burn. Mama’s pies were not rich—not saturated in so much butter and canned milk that the stomach churned as arteries clogged.

Ms. Ada, Mama’s friend, a tall, well-stacked bronzed woman with a generous heart to match her generous build, once made me her special sweet-potato pie as a homecoming gift for my first semester at college. While gorgeous to look at, and finished with a perfect golden spiral crust, Miss Ada’s gift-pie was so rich, so saturated in butter, that I couldn’t eat more than two bites. I suspect now that Mama’s pies were made with my dietary limitations