

# How Do You Update a Community Cookbook? With Tablespoons of Love Sprinkled with Patience

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**M**.F.K. Fisher, the exquisite writer of all things cuisine, explains in her book *The Art of Eating* that home-grown cookbooks are “utterly useless unless you know some of the women whose prized recipes are printed in them.” Fisher understood how important community cookbooks are, especially if you know the recipe’s author. Imagine how exciting it is to discover a favorite recipe of your grandma’s in her church community cookbook – the recipe you just kept forgetting to write down.

Fundraising is most often the reason for developing a community cookbook. This dates back to 1864 in the United States, when Maria J. Moss published and sold *A Poetical Cookbook* to raise money to help subsidize medical costs for the Union soldiers. Community cookbooks can be a snapshot into past times; a history lesson. We can learn more about the hippie society of 1960s and 1970s by reading the *Tribal Cookbook* by True Light Beavers, or be introduced to the Hutterite community through a *Hutterite Community Cookbook* by Joanita Kant.

My mother, Coula Kootsikis, collected donated family recipes from members of her local Greek Orthodox church community and sold the resulting cookbook, *Grecian Festival – by the sea*, as a fundraiser for the church. Questions began popping up in my mind as I started reviewing and making some of the recipes. Did yia yia (grandma) really use an official measuring cup or was it a handful? What do the initials t.p. really mean? Tablespoon, teaspoon, toilet paper, or is it a typo? If you think t.p. is a typo for teaspoon, you are right.

In her recently published fourth edition of *Will Write for Food*, Dianne Jacobs breaks down the complexities of writing proper recipes. Her book is very relevant to today’s world of cookbooks with recipe plug-ins, blogs, and webpages written in a world driven by computers. Jacobs gives great practical advice such writing out measurements like teaspoon.

With years of experience reading and analyzing scientific literature as a pharmacist, I soon learned it was a delusion to think that a scientific perspective would be enough to edit and update the *Grecian Festival – by the sea* cookbook. Taking a scientific approach did help a bit, at least to formulate a consistent approach to reviewing and taste-testing the recipes, but I needed to learn much more.

Before testing out the recipes, I thought it would be interesting to see how many Greek or Mediterranean-style cookbooks exist, including blog posts or apps. The answer? A lot. I already had a nice library of community-inspired Greek cookbooks, many of which I found at Greek festivals during my travels. With Covid still hanging around and traveling curtailed, Amazon and discount book sites such as AbeBooks have been wonderful go-to places to purchase books. Greek cookbooks are fun to read, sometimes even with inimitable acknowledgements - most notably in the *Grecian Plate* with a thank-you to the North Carolina Pharmaceutical Association.

*The Grecian Festival – by the sea* cookbook was dedicated to the Greek Orthodox church built in 1991 in Long Beach to resemble the white-washed churches adorning the Greek islands. The origins of the cookbook remain stamped in my memory as a maze of 4-by-6-inch index cards covering the floor of our family room. The recipes were hand-written because my mother didn’t type. They were accepted on good faith and were not tested for accuracy nor organized with a written template in mind.

In all honesty, with my mother’s handwriting being less than stellar, I think information got lost in translation before the cookbook was sent to a print shop. Many years ago, I tried making my mother’s “famous” butter tea cookies (kourambiethes), the kind of cookie made with real butter and covered in mounds of sifted powdered sugar. Everyone loved my mother’s cookies so much; church members would ask her to whip up a couple hundred for their kid’s wedding!

My kourambiethes tasted okay, but I made only 2 dozen instead of 4 dozen as written in the cookbook. After several failed attempts, I asked my mother “what happened - what did I do wrong?” “Oh,” she replied, “that’s a typo.” That’s when it hit me that I would like to edit and update this local treasure of family recipes graciously donated by church ladies: No more t.p. abbreviations.

According to my calculations, if I made at least 4 recipes each year for 30 years, I would be done with the cookbook by the time I retired. Well, I retired and the new edition is still a dream, but now with a glimmer of hope. A team of church members and a few friends and

relatives are pulling together to check out each recipe for accuracy and duplications. Our 13-year-old grandson, Stephen, is the webmaster. My immediate team includes Sophia and Ashlyn, 13-year-old neighbors and sous chefs extraordinaire, and a neighborhood of gracious test-tasters.

If you make Coula’s melt-in-your-mouth kourambiethes, consider adding chopped almonds. After making these cookies at least two or three times a year for 40 years, I recently tried the recipe for the very first time after adding the chopped almonds. Cookies with and without almonds were the objects of a semi-blind taste test by my Vista Street neighbors. The cookies with the chopped almonds won hands down, as one of my neighbors commented that “the chopped almonds added a nice moistness.” Why did it take me 40 years to add the almonds? Well, the recipe said “optional” and from my perspective that meant more work. Life is so much easier now with a Cuisinart.

We now go forth in 2022 setting up a test kitchen, editing, and taste testing the recipes from the local, home-grown, Long Beach Greek Orthodox cookbook.

Maria Kootsikis and her husband, Paul Montalbano, are retired clinical pharmacists living the wonderful retired life in Bluff Heights. You might see them walking their beloved Cheeto.



## Coula’s Beloved Butter Tea Cookies (Kourambiethes)

**Prep time:** 15-20 minutes    **Prep time:** 15-20 minutes    **Serves:** 6

### Ingredients

1 pound salted butter  
 ½ cup granulated sugar  
 2 egg yolks  
 1 teaspoon baking powder  
 1 tablespoon brandy  
 4 ½ cups flour  
 1 cup finely chopped almonds  
 One clove for each cookie (optional)  
 1 pound powdered sugar for top of cookies

### Directions

Preheat oven to 375 F.  
 Beat softened butter with electric mixer until butter turns white (about 10 minutes).  
 Add ½ cup granulated sugar and 2 egg yolks to beaten butter and continue to mix thoroughly.  
 Sift 4 cups of flour and 1 teaspoon baking powder into butter mixture, thoroughly mixing (note: if dough feels too sticky, add more flour).  
 Sprinkle brandy into the mixture and add almonds while mixing thoroughly. Shape the dough into balls the size of your palm and place on an ungreased cookie sheet.  
 Bake for 12-15 minutes until slightly brown to give them a slightly nutty taste.  
 Sift powdered sugar onto wax paper while cookies are baking.  
 Place baked cookies on powdered sugar.  
 While cookies are still hot, sift more powder sugar on top of cookies until fully covered.  
 Place cookies in paper cupcake holders to serve.

When making kourambiethes for Christmas, the Greek tradition is to add one clove in each cookie before baking to symbolize the spices brought by the three wise men to baby Jesus.