

Interview with Marsha Closson and Winona Martin
Interview by Karissa Lee, Jason Sayers, April 18, 2013

Winona Martin and Marsha Closson are a mother and daughter from South Georgia. Ms. Martin was born and raised in Chula, Georgia, and grew up cooking at her mother's knee. Ms. Closson was born and raised in Albany, Georgia, and also grew up her cooking at her grandmother's knee. Cooking and food have been and continue to be an integral part of their lives.

Karissa Lee: When did you start to cook?

Marsha Closson: I started at a pretty young age. I used to help my mother and grandmother when they were baking. I used to stir the bowls.

Jason Sayers: When did you start cooking, Winona?

Winona Martin: I started creating full meals at the age of 15 years, all by myself. I would cook for my family, the people who worked on the fields and me.

Karissa Lee: How many people would you cook for at one time?

Winona Martin: I would prepare a meal for as many as 10 people.

Karissa Lee: Where did you grow up?

Winona Martin: In Chula, Georgia.

Marsha Closson: I grew up in Albany, Georgia.

Karissa Lee: From your youth to this day what has been your favorite dish to both make and eat?

Marsha Closson: I love baking cakes from scratch. I don't really like getting pre-made ingredients. Creating my own ingredients is almost to me a type of therapy. I really like to eat munchies, chicken and dumplings, and my all-time favorite would have to be pizza.

Jason Sayers: Have you ever made a pizza?

Marsha Closson: Yes, we used to make pizza sometimes when I was little but not very often.

Winona Martin: My favorite foods would have to be fried chicken and pecan pie. I truly love to make pecan pies, and they will always have a special place in my stomach.

Colleen Closson: How old were you when you were first able to bake your own cake or prepare a whole meal?

Winona Martin: At about 10 or 11 I made my first cake

Marsha Closson: At around 10, however, I'm not very good at passing my cooking abilities down to my daughter.

Everyone: laughter

Karissa Lee: Can you cook Colleen?

Colleen Closson: I can make Ramen.

Everyone: laughter

Karissa Lee: Is there a dish that you have always tried to make but you could never really get?

Marsha Closson: Chinese food. I have never made a really good Chinese dish before. It is the main thing that I have trouble with.

Colleen Closson: You have tried Alfredo as well if you recall.

Marsha Closson: I have before, but am not very successful in the Chinese or the Italian cooking style.

Winona Martin: I could never master lasagna. I have bought it at the store, but I have never been able to successfully make a good lasagna dish.

Colleen Closson: What would you consider to be your signature dish?

Marsha Closson: Fried Chicken and dumplings, and I can always bake banana pudding.

Karissa Lee: How do you make your chicken and dumplings, do you roll your own dough?

Marsha Closson: In a sense I sort of cheat. I don't roll my own dough because I find that the ones sold in the store work just as good. I will cook the chicken the night before, in a crock pot. If I'm feeling healthy I let it sit overnight so that the grease floats to the top then I can get rid of it.

Winona Martin: My signature dish is pecan pie. My husband was a school principal and every once in a while he would have supper for his teachers, he asked me to prepare some of my pies for dessert. I made sixteen pecan pies.

Colleen Closson: How long did it take you to make all those pies?

Winona Martin: It took me about half a day.

Jason Sayers: What is a pecan pie and how do you make it?

Marsha Closson: Pecan trees are all over Georgia, they look a bit similar to oak trees but they are not as strong.

Winona Martin: First you gather your ingredients: sugar, Karo syrup, eggs, vanilla flavoring. Mix these things up in a bowl, add a hand full of pecans, put it in a pie shell and then bake it.

Colleen Closson: Where would you get the pecans from?

Winona Martin: We had pecan trees in the backyard.

Jason Sayers: How long would it take you to pick a cup of pecans?

Winona Martin: No more than five minutes, but normally we would have the nuts picked and the meat picked out of the shells before we started the baking process. The shelling of the nuts was a rather time-consuming process.

Marsha Closson: After the pecans were processed, we would store them and freeze them. This would keep a steady source of pecans at hand. In Winona's day, this was the most efficient way of getting cheap and easy food.

Colleen Closson: Would you keep chickens and cows in the yard as well?

Winona Martin: Yes we would keep chickens but no cows.

Jason Sayers: How many chickens did you have?

Winona Martin: (Chuckles) we had many chickens, a good estimate would be a yard full.

Colleen Closson: Did you kill any of the chickens? If so how would you go about doing this?

Winona Martin: No! Ha-ha, that was my husband's job; he would wring the necks of the chickens. This snapping of the neck would cause instant death.

Colleen Closson: Who has been the most influential person in the development of your cooking? Was it your mother?

Marsha Closson: My grandmother, she had a lot of patience when teaching me how to cook. She also loved to bake and that was what I really liked to watch her do. My mother was more of a main course cooker rather than desserts baker. My Mother (Winona) saw herself as a meat cooker.

Karissa Lee: Have you ever tried to barbecue? If so how?

Winona Martin: My grandmother was my inspiration in the kitchen. As for barbecue I thought to myself one day, what could I do to be different? I thought barbecue. I went to the store bought some lean backbone; put it in the crock to cook all night. In the morning I put it on a different pan and put barbecue sauce on it. I thought my kids would have licked the plate.

Colleen Closson: Do you think that the future of southern cooking will change dramatically in comparison to the past?

Marsha Closson: It already is, today people focus a lot of attention on eating healthy, that right there is already a big change. Whereas, in the past people eat what was readily available to them. Even I don't cook the same way my grandmother cooked. In the past people cooked with mainly lard (fat from pig). Another difference is that people don't cook from scratch anymore; they go to the store and buy things premade. The only time I would buy anything premade would be if there was a tight situation. An additional reason to this change is the addition of preservatives. In the past there were. Not as many if any preservatives available.

Winona Martin: I agree with Marsha.

Jason Sayers: Do you believe that cooks in the past are more genuine when compared to cooks today?

Marsha Closson: Yes I do, unless they are professional cooks. This may not be true in every case but I'm speaking very generally.

Colleen Closson: Do you think this is partially because more women are joining the work force?

Marsha Closson: Yes, this definitely plays a part in it. Another factor would be the introduction of new products such as "grandma cakes" (cakes that come in boxes, just add water). There was a time in the South when these things were seen for elites.

Jason Sayers: Did the men cook much?

Marsha Closson: Yes, in fact my father cooked a lot. The thing is, men were more into barbecuing and grilling. This in the past and even today is seen as a more manly type of cooking. Men also did most of the cooking at fish fries.

Colleen Closson: Would you say cooking day to day is more for women than men?

Winona Martin: Yes, it was and still is today.

Jason Sayers: Are there guys who can cook better than you?

Winona Martin: NO!

Marsha Closson: Only professionals. The top chefs in the world are usually men.

Colleen Closson: Have you ever considered being a commercial chef?

Winona Martin: No, I don't love it that much. Also, I don't like washing dishes

Marsha Closson: I haven't thought about it too much because after a while I think I would get tired of it. However, I do like washing dishes.

Karissa Lee: Do you prefer cooking by yourself or with other people?

Marsha Closson: I would rather cook alongside friends.

Colleen Closson: Do you prefer to cook for yourself or do you prefer cooking for others?

Marsha Closson: I don't like cooking for myself at all; many of my elder family members grew up on a farm. This meant that family was always around and my grandmother would always cook more many people including the people in the fields. I actually cannot cook small portions. In fact sometimes when my husband sees me cooking, he'll ask me who is coming to dinner. I don't know how to make my portions any smaller. I really like the fact that when I cook once I don't have to cook for another day or two. In today's world you have many people who just throw away left overs. That was not common in the past.

Colleen Closson: Is it safe to say that you have to cook a substantial amount of food when cooking for males in relation to when you're cooking for females?

Marsha Closson: Oh yes.

Jason Sayers: Who is the best cook in the room?

Marsha Closson: I would have to give it to my mother (Winona). Back in her prime she was a way better cook than I am today.

Winona Martin: Thank you.

Colleen Closson: Have you found any restaurant in the South that you consider having good southern food?

Marsha Closson: Yes I went to a place earlier today named Oil Lamp, it was genuine southern food.

Colleen Closson: Are there any good Southern style places in Charleston where you're from?

Marsha Closson: Yes there are places called Gullah places, which are places where African slaves use to live. Today these places are populated by the offspring of former slaves. These people still try to keep close to their African culture; they even have their own dialect. We also eat a lot of oysters.

Colleen Closson: In times of scarcity what would you eat?

Winona Martin: In times of scarcity I would eat things like squirrels, mayonnaise sandwiches and tomato sandwiches. Living on the farm really made hard times bearable.

Jason Sayers: Is there any food that you don't like?

Winona Martin: I cannot stand raw oysters and tuna fish. However, I love oyster stew.

Marsha Closson: My grandmother use to make these things called chitlings which are pig insides. They smelled really awful, and they tasted even worse. They would have to be my least favorite food. I also don't like Brunswick stew made with pig cheeks.

Jason Sayers: Thanks for your time, we really appreciate it.

Colleen Closson: Thanks for everything mom and grandma.

Karissa Lee: Thanks for everything.