

CUPCAKES ON THE COUNTER, a collection of memoirs and heirloom recipes by RaeAnn Proost, is a legacy for friends and family who touched our hearts, nourished our bodies, and enriched our lives. We authors serve up a mélange of memories.

CUPCAKES ON THE COUNTER, THE STOVES AND STORIES
OF OUR FAMILIES

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Cupcakes on the Counter

**The Stoves and Stories
of Our Families**

**Memoirs and Recipes
collected by**

RaeAnn Proost

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

MORSELS	1
1. CUPCAKES COOLING ON THE COUNTER BY RAEANN PROOST	3
2. A WALK IN MY ANCESTOR’S SHOES BY JEAN BIDSTRUP	10
3. LEFSE, LUTEFISK AND THE BEST FOR LAST BY KEITH ERICKSON.....	15
4. AT THE TABLE BY CHLOE’ YELENA MILLER.....	21
5. THANKSGIVING MEMORIES BY EMILY COLLINSON	24
6. COMFORT FOOD OF CHILDHOOD BY RENIE BURGHARDT	28
7. IT’S CUPBOARD CLEANING DAY BY KARLA STOVER	32
8. ANYTHING BUT A SMOOTHIE BY GARY PROOST.....	38
9. EAT! EAT! BY SUZANNE COPE	42
10. MRS. SCHWARZ BY CARA HOLMAN	49
11. DAD’S SHORTBREAD BY GABRIELA WILLIAMS	53
12. MY GRANDMOTHER’S COOKING BY MARG ALDRIDGE .	57
13. PRESERVATION BY THOM ROCK	63
14. CRUMBIN BY ANITA LANNING.....	69
15. PIDDLE IN THE POOL BY RAEANN PROOST	74
16. COOKING LESSONS BY ALICE BULLOCK.....	80
17. WILD WOMAN <i>SALSA ABUELA DE LA MUERTE</i> BY PEYTON NESLER.....	83
18. MOLLY’S BREAD BY KATHLEEN HILL	87
19. THE DREAM BY MARGOT KRINGELHEDE	93

CUPCAKES ON THE COUNTER

20. BUT WE <i>ALWAYS</i> HAVE THAT FAMILY FOOD TRADITIONS DIE HARD BY JOAN TIFFANY DORAN.....	96
21. R IS FOR RHUBARB BY RAEANN PROOST	101
22. NEW YEAR’S EVE AT THE MUD PIE PALACE BY MUD PIE NAN NANCY WANLESS.....	106
23. A GOOEY GREEN FROSTING SURPRISE BY RENÉE M. NICHOLLS.....	110
24. MAYTAG MEMORIES BY CONSTANCE L. GILBERT	114
25. MATZOH BALL SOUP LOVE BY SOPHIA RIEMER.....	120
26. SCONES BY NICOLE E. F. TAYLOR.....	124
27. BUTTERMILK PANCAKES BY ALEXANDRA OLAH	127
28. THE SPECIAL CLOWN CUPCAKES BY JUSTINE ALEXANDRA WILM.....	131
29. MY GRANDMA’S BANH XEO BY KRISTINA PHAN	135
30. PFEFFERNÜSSE BY H. M VICKI KEENEY	140
31. SERVED WITH LOVE BY PAM WHITE.....	145
32. BELIEVE IN SANTA CLAUS BY ELSIEMARIE ROCHNA...	149
33. CUPCAKES BY MOMMY BY RAEANN PROOST	154
MEMENTO	160
THE AUTHORS.....	163

CUPCAKES ON THE COUNTER



Cupcakes Cooling on the Counter

by RaeAnn Proost

She made the cupcakes her husband fancied. Cinnamon from a newly opened red tin scented her tiny kitchen. As they baked, Gert washed the batter bowl, mixing spoon, and measuring cups and spoons and left them to dry on a towel by the sink. She planned their little supper. She would add a few noodles and vegetables to the stock and pulled meat of yesterday's chicken. She opened the can of mixed vegetables, drained them, and poured them out on a plate, the better to pick out the lima beans. Leo loathed limas. She put the beans in a teacup, covered them with a saucer, and laid them to rest in the rear of the icebox. They were not her favorites, but they would be part of her lunch the next day. Waste not, want not.

She placed her spiced raisin cupcakes on the kitchen counter to cool. Following tub time, she would ice them and wrap some of them in waxed paper for her husband to share the next day with the salesman and tailors where he worked in downtown Long Beach. Leo would be home in about an hour and they would share their simple supper with his favorite cupcakes for dessert.

As she got on with her bath, she sprinkled floral salts into the water and the fragrance of roses and lilies floated up with the steam. Her little bathroom became a humid flower shop. She placed a folded towel nearby, doffed her wrapper, under garments, and slippers and eased into the tub as it slowly filled. Playfully, she stuck a toe up the spigot and caused a splash on the floor she would have to mop up later. When her bath was just so, she leaned back and allowed herself a few minutes to relax. She passed her hands over her abdomen and dreamed of carrying a baby there soon. A teeny boy, a sweet little girl, it didn't matter as long as the child was healthy.

CUPCAKES ON THE COUNTER

Her fantasy was interrupted by an ever so slight shift of the tub. She thought she had dozed and jerked awake. As she opened her eyes, she noticed strange ripples crossing the water. Then the tub moved in earnest. The bath salts jar pirouetted and careened off the edge of the tub and shattered on the tile floor. She clambered out of the bathtub and used the towel to whisk away the shards of glass. She slid into her slippers, snugged the paisley wrapper around, and tied it at her waist. The tremors intensified as she sought the handle of the bathroom door. She opened it and saw her great old upright piano lurch toward her on its massive swivel casters. She thought she might be trapped when another heave pitched it in the direction of the front door. With another tremor the mahogany instrument pivoted and back it came. As the piano veered slightly left, Gert moved to the right and saw her wedding photograph dance crazily on the wall. She lunged for it, tucked it under her arm, dashed out the front door, and slammed it behind her. She caught her breath on the landing and staggered down the stairs where she found frightened neighbors huddled in the street.

Her breath returned to normal, and her first thought was of Leo, blocks away in the haberdashery. Her second thought was that she was standing in the middle of the street clad only in her housecoat. She had forgotten her purse and neglected to lock the door. She would worry about that later. She remembered those cupcakes on the kitchen counter. With the rumble of her stomach, she wished she had grabbed a few.

Police and rescue workers arrived. Gert was forbidden to return to their apartment. She and others, suddenly homeless, were directed to the church around the corner where a volunteer helped her sort through discarded clothing. She found something suitable to wear, but there were no underpinnings to be had. There was a pair of sensible shoes that almost fit. She was given two nickels, carfare to and from downtown, if the trolleys were running. She pocketed the nickels, wrapped her slippers and wedding picture in her housecoat, and set out determined to find her husband.

The trolleys were at a standstill so she strode south along the boulevard in the direction of her husband's shop. Her newly acquired shoes nipped at her heels as she scanned the crowds and the dust began

THE STOVES AND STORIES OF OUR FAMILIES

to settle. Some folks headed north or south with a purpose while others milled, still in shock. Children whimpered and adults whispered as if listening for another jolt. The strange quiet was occasionally punctuated with a joyous shout of recognition. Gert passed people with shopping bags and suitcases and pillowcases filled with whatever they could gather in those frightening moments as roofs caved and chimneys toppled. A pale child in a misbuttoned sweater carried a book under one arm and dragged a huge Teddy behind her. The little girl tried to keep up with her mother who had a toddler and her own bundle in tow. Police maneuvered the forlorn away from fragile buildings and in the direction of hastily erected shelters. Cots, blankets, water, and food welcomed the displaced masses. Hungry children were fed, for the earthquake had disrupted the dinner hour.

The sights and sounds and smells of disaster overwhelmed her. Her eyes brightened with tears when finally among the north-moving crowd she spotted her dear Leo. Somewhere between home and shop they played *finders, keepers*, and they embraced as if it was the end of the world.

It wasn't. Gert and Leo stayed with friends whose home had not been condemned. They borrowed clothes and made do. Some days later, they were allowed to return to the little apartment to gather their few possessions. Prepared to wrap and pack, they walked through the unlocked front door armed with boxes and old newspapers.

They spotted that pesky piano. It had finally come to rest against the bathroom door. Gert moved through the kitchen and found her spiced raisin cupcakes still cooling on the kitchen counter. The petrified sweets were not even tempting. While Leo gathered their clothes, Gert carefully wrapped and boxed her wedding dishes. She missed a teacup and saucer and she remembered they were in the icebox. She cautiously opened the door and found the cup chipped and the limas scattered. She could laugh or she could cry. "So much for lunch," she chuckled.

The Long Beach earthquake occurred on March 10, 1933, at 5:55 in the evening. With a magnitude of 6.3, there was a

CUPCAKES ON THE COUNTER

collective sigh of relief when destruction to school buildings was assessed in the days following the disaster. Thankfully the children were home from school. Gert and Leo's stucco dwelling was damaged beyond repair.

Gert's Spice Cup Cakes

Preheat oven to 375°. Prepare tins for 12 cupcakes.

1 cup	sugar
1 cup	raisins
4 tablespoons	melted butter
1	egg
pinch	salt
1 teaspoon	cinnamon
2 teaspoons	nutmeg
1 ³ / ₄ cups	flour
1/2 cup	broken walnuts
1 cup	milk
1 ¹ / ₂ tablespoons	vinegar
1 teaspoon	soda

Mix sugar, raisins, and melted butter. Add egg, salt, cinnamon, nutmeg, flour, and walnuts. Combine milk, vinegar and soda and pour the mixture over the dry ingredients. Stir just until blended.

Fill cupcake tins or papers about half full.

Bake at 375°, about 20 to 25 minutes. Cool and ice with lemon frosting.

CUPCAKES ON THE COUNTER

Lemon Frosting

3 ounces	softened cream cheese
2 teaspoons	lemon juice
2 teaspoons	lemon rind, grated
pinch	salt
2 cups	powdered sugar (about)

Blend to spreading consistency and ice cupcakes. Yield: 12 cupcakes

CUPCAKES ON THE COUNTER



Preservation**by Thom Rock**

I'm haunted by a pickle. The kitchen shelves glimmer with jars of homemade preserves after a summer's worth of gardening, harvesting and putting up. Clove scented beets glow deep garnet and the cauliflower sparkles crystalline, bejeweled with tiny bright red, and lethally hot, Thai peppers. Zucchini pickles stack up right next to the gingered green beans. Honey dills, bread n' butters, sweet and sour, gherkins, mustard pickles and relishes: everything's here. Everything except the tiny pickles my grandmother used to put up in glass jars with glass lids and rubber seals, the ones she'd set on the wobbly wooden cellar stairs in expectation of family dinners around the old oak table, it's wooden length stretched by innumerable leaves and warmed by the old wood-fired cook stove.

I've spent the summer canning and preserving. Each evening, after a day's worth of picking, peeling, boiling and packing, I listen attentively for that satisfying *pop* as the lids expel the last of the air trapped in the jar, creating a safe and long lasting vacuum, one that will insure garden picked taste in snow covered January. But, there is no satisfaction when it comes to the itty bitty sour pickles I'm craving. Always at the table while I was growing up, the recipe is lost. Cheek-suckingly sour and smaller than my childhood fingers, they were a required element of the New England boiled dinners that so often appeared at the table along with sons and daughters, aunts and uncles and cousins. Part of their taste was the challenge of fishing the little things out of the jar; you might think you had a good hold on one but then, like a shimmering fish, it would slip through your fingers and splash back into the briny depths. But, oh, once caught and brought to your lips, it promised something beyond the ordinary. Try as I might, though, I cannot seem to duplicate the bracing flavor of my grandmother's pickles.

CUPCAKES ON THE COUNTER

If I had known, as a child, that I'd be craving her pickles now, that I would spend an entire summer trying to find that mysterious combination of snap, sour, and surprise, I would have asked her for the recipe and carefully copied it down in my best third grade penmanship. But I didn't think anything of it then. How could I? I never thought there might come a day when there would be no pickles lined up on the cellar stairs, or that the old table would no longer groan under the weight of boiled dinners, or that grandmothers, mothers and fathers, aunts and uncles and cousins would disappear one by one from the table.

Still, the tongue remembers, it reminisces: a bite of the past, a spoonful of memory... the bottle of vinegar passed with the plate of root vegetables at family gatherings, my mother and her brother fighting over the last of the parsnips. Aunts in their flowery aprons and housecoats gathered in the kitchen afterwards washing the dishes, the men folk returning when it was time to run whatever was left of the boiled dinner through the food mill so that, in the morning, there would be red flannel hash for breakfast. And those sure and dependable pickles, small but steadfast, passed 'round the table at every gathering.

Once they even showed up out in the woods at my uncle's sugar shack when the grown ups made a traditional sugar on snow party for the kids. Our eyes wide in anticipation and our pant legs frozen stiff from playing in the snow, we watched the thick maple syrup, boiled until it was nearly candy, turn gooey and chewy as it was drizzled over chunks of snow. The adults ate theirs with bites of the little pickles in order to cut the sweetness of the sugary treat. Like my young cousins, at the time I found the concept of balancing sweet with sour an absurd idea, but I was mesmerized by the unexpected appearance of that familiar jar of pickles.

So I've spent the summer in a pickle, as it were, trying to recapture the compact zing of Gram's little cornichons. The tricky part was that I was trying to resurrect not only a pickle but a pickled memory. The challenge was how to add the creak of those wobbly wooden stairs to the crock, or stir in the damp earthy smell of a dirt floor cellar. Vivid yet elusive, the pickles are preserved not in vinegar or salt, but float somewhere in the briny depths between my taste buds and a sleepy

neuron dozing quietly in some dusty corner of my brain. Neuroscientists can now tell us that the dusty corner is likely to be somewhere in the hippocampus or amygdala, two parts of the brain that maintain emotional and long-term memory. Whereas all of our other senses travel through different regions of the brain, taste and smell shoot directly to memory. I persisted: taste, memory and emotion seemed to combine with increasing intensity at every bite. For as long as the garden kept pumping out cucumbers, a brief but precious few weeks here in the northeastern corner of the country, I became a student of the briny, the bitter and all things biting. I spent hours discussing sour with anyone who'd listen, delineating taut from crisp, and crisp from crunchy, or debating the subtle differences between tart and tangy.

Sour, it turns out, has a split personality. There's the good sour, the one that adds perk and pizzazz to our otherwise bland diet. And then there's the evil twin sour, the one that spoils our food. We refer to bad feelings as sour grapes, but we intentionally make other fruits and veggies sour. In fact, we deliberately make any number of foods sour, pickling pig's feet, flower buds, or hard boiled eggs. Not even the little herring can escape our passion for pucker. Sour milk in the carton is something you don't want to slog into your morning coffee or tea, but how sad the baked potato would become without its luscious slather of sour cream. And home bakers have long practiced the art of clabbering, or souring the milk in a recipe on purpose, to produce a tart flavor and ensure a tender crumb. Whenever she made doughnuts, Gram always soured the milk. Sour, when we're on its good side, can perform miracles. The pickle, for example: cucumber plus vinegar plus salt and spice somehow adds up to more than the sum of its parts.

The power of sour is something our grandparents understood well. Canning, pickling and preserving were necessary elements of their economy. Food was something to be thought about carefully in a time before there was a grocery store on every corner stocking whatever you might wish, whether it was in season or not. But I find myself wondering if there might be more to sour than simple preservation, and that women like Gram knew what that was. Whatever they put up in those gleaming glass jars, whether brined or vinegared, was not only

CUPCAKES ON THE COUNTER

sustaining but symbolic. It was the present carried into the future: a certain hopefulness, perhaps. Or, maybe they canned as a way of remembering the past. Maybe they understood some secret about how the counterweight of sour makes the sweetness of memory endure.

Gram outlived her husband by decades, having attended to him in his wheelchair for the last years of his life. She stood stoically first by the graveside of her infant child, then her grown son, and two of her daughters, one of them my mother. Sometimes I wonder if, when she soured the milk in her doughnut batter, she was thinking of them. As a child I watched her make those doughnuts any number of times. I would stand on a chair next to the counter and follow her hands as she whipped up a batch from memory. I imagined we were scientists as she stirred a tablespoon of vinegar into the measuring cup of milk and waited for the predictable results. Often, she would hand me the tin cutter and I would stamp out the floppy, concentric circles of dough in preparation for their deep fry dip in the hot lard. In my mind's eye, I can see her making chocolate cake, cinnamon buns, fresh doughnuts, oatmeal cookies, even homemade fudge, but I never actually saw her put up those little pickles. They simply ghosted their way onto the cellar stairs.

So, I've searched all summer to find the secret ingredient, trying various concoctions of vinegars, incantatory grape leaves, conjuring roots, seeds of hope. I never thought to measure in longing or the understanding of just how short the growing season is; how moments linger for such a short time. Or that some are all too brief, and begin to flicker and fade, unless we can somehow preserve them.

"Almost Like Gram's" Pickles

8 pounds than 3 inches	cucumbers, the smaller the better, no more
1 ¼ cups	canning salt, divided
12 cups	water, divided
3 tablespoons	pickling spice
6 cups	white vinegar
7	dill heads, fresh
7 cloves	garlic

Wash and trim cucumbers, and place in a large non-reactive bowl or crock with several cups of ice cubes. Pour over solution of one-half cup salt dissolved in 4 cups of water. Let sit in a cool place overnight.

Prepare canner, jars, lids and bands.

In a large non-reactive pot combine remaining 8 cups water, the pickling spice, vinegar and the remaining ¾ cup salt. Bring to a slow boil and simmer gently for 10 - 15 minutes until salt is dissolved and spices have infused the brine. Meanwhile, drain and rinse the cucumbers.

Pack the cucumbers into hot, sterilized jars, adding a fresh dill head and one garlic clove to each. Leave approximately a ¼ inch headspace at the top of each jar. Ladle the hot brine into the jars to cover the cucumbers, preserving the ¼ headspace. Remove any air bubbles.

Place jars in canner rack and submerge in canner. Process for 12 minutes in a boiling water bath.

Remove jars and allow to cool completely. Check lids for proper seal before storing. Any jars that have not completely sealed should be refrigerated immediately.

Makes 7 pint jars.

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