Meemaw Ruby's 5 Free Recipes

A little taste of the Recipe Box

Well hey, sugar. I'm Meemaw Ruby, and these are five of the recipes folks ask me for most — cathead biscuits, skillet cornbread, cream gravy, Georgia peach cobbler, and a pot of pintos. Every one is set down the easy way, in plain steps, the way I'd show you if you were standing right here at my counter.

Make one this week. If they treat you right, there's four hundred and ten more where these came from.

— Ruby

Cathead Biscuits

My mama made these every Sunday morning of my growing-up, big as a cat's head and soft as a Sunday nap, and the smell of them baking is the smell of home to me.

A WORD FROM RUBY

— A cathead biscuit is not a cutter biscuit, and you do not want it to be. You do not roll these and you do not cut them. You pinch off a handful of soft dough and you drop it, and it bakes up craggy and tall with soft sides where the biscuits touched in the pan. The whole secret is a soft, wet dough and a hot oven, and hands that do not work it to death. The more you fool with biscuit dough, the tougher it gets, and a dough worked smooth is a tough biscuit waiting to happen, so I am going to tell y'all to quit touching it a good while before you think you ought to.

WHAT YOU NEED

- 3 cups self-rising flour (White Lily if you can get it, because soft Southern flour is the whole point)
- 3/4 cup cold shortening or lard, or half of each
- 1 1/2 cups cold buttermilk, maybe a little more
- a little melted butter for the tops

HOW IT'S DONE

1. Heat your oven to 475 degrees with the rack in the middle, and grease a 12-inch cast-iron skillet or a 9 by 13 pan. A cathead wants to hit a hot oven fast, so have everything ready.

2. Put your flour in a big bowl. Cut the cold shortening in with your fingers or a fork till it looks like coarse meal with some pea-size lumps left. Do not overdo it. Those lumps are what make it flaky.
3. Pour in the buttermilk all at once and stir with a fork just till it comes together into a soft, wet, shaggy dough. It will be wetter and stickier than you are comfortable with. That is right. Leave it be.
4. Flour your hands good. Pinch off a piece about the size of your fist, roll it loose between your hands just enough to round it, and set it in the pan. Set them so the sides touch, because that is how they climb instead of spread.
5. Bake 15 to 18 minutes, till the tops are deep golden. Brush the tops with melted butter the minute they come out. This makes 8 or 9 big biscuits.

THE BY-FEEL WAY

— My mama never measured the buttermilk. She poured till the dough "quit being dry and started being scared," meaning it looked too wet and sticky to handle, and that is exactly when she stopped. A dough you can roll out easy is a dough that will bake up tough and low. You want it so soft you have to flour your hands to pick it up. And she judged them done by the nose as much as the eye. When the whole kitchen smelled like Sunday, they were close.

TROUBLES FIXED

- *Biscuits came out flat and hard:* You worked the dough too much, or it was too dry. Stir only till it just comes together, and add buttermilk till it's wet and shaggy. A soft dropped dough, barely handled, is the whole game.
- *Pale tops, doughy middles:* Oven not hot enough. These want a truly hot oven, 475, and the pan going in fast. Do not open the door to peek for the first 12 minutes.
- *Spread out flat instead of climbing tall:* Set them touching in the pan next time. Biscuits that lean on each other climb, and biscuits sitting alone sprawl.
- *Tasted flat:* Old self-rising flour loses its lift. If your flour has been in the cabinet a year, that is your trouble, so start with fresh.

Skillet Cornbread

Cornbread in a hot black skillet is about as Southern as a thing can get, and I have baked it nearly every week of my grown life, for the table at home, for the noon dinner at the peanut mill, and for the fellowship hall.

A WORD FROM RUBY

— There is one mistake that ruins a pan of cornbread, and that is a cold skillet. The iron has to be good and hot before the batter ever touches it, hot enough that the bacon drippings shimmer and the batter sizzles when it lands. That sizzle is the crust being born, and the crust is the whole point. There is no sugar in mine, because there was none in my mama's, but I will not fuss at y'all if there is some in yours. Save whatever you do not eat, because day-old cornbread makes the best dressing you ever put on a Thanksgiving table. If all you have is self-rising cornmeal mix, use 2 cups of it with 1 3/4 cups buttermilk and leave out the salt, baking powder and baking soda, since they are already in the sack.

WHAT YOU NEED

- 2 cups plain cornmeal, white or yellow, stone-ground if you can get it (not self-rising)
- 1 teaspoon salt
- 1 teaspoon baking powder
- 1 teaspoon baking soda
- 2 cups buttermilk, a little more if the batter is stiff
- 1 egg
- 3 tablespoons bacon drippings (lard or oil will do in a pinch)

HOW IT'S DONE

1. Put a 10-inch cast-iron skillet in the oven, empty, and heat the oven to 450 degrees. Once it is up to heat, give the skillet at least 10 more minutes. You want that iron good and hot.
2. While it heats, whisk the cornmeal, salt, baking powder and baking soda together in a bowl. In another bowl, beat the egg into the buttermilk.
3. Pour the wet into the dry and stir just till it comes together. A few lumps are fine. It should pour like a thick batter and not sit there like dough. If it will not pour, splash in a little more buttermilk.
4. Work quick now. Pull the hot skillet out with a thick mitt, because the handle is as hot as the oven, and drop in the bacon drippings. Tip and swirl so they run over the bottom and up the sides.
5. Pour the batter in all at once. It should sizzle loud around the edge. Slide it right back into the oven.
6. Bake 20 to 25 minutes, till the top is golden and the edges have pulled away from the iron and gone deep brown. Let it sit 5 minutes, run a knife around the edge, and turn it out onto a plate so the crusty bottom shows. Cut it in 8 wedges and

serve hot with butter. Lay a folded dishrag over the skillet handle till it cools, so nobody grabs it bare-handed.

THE BY-FEEL WAY

— The skillet is ready when the bacon drippings run thin as water across the bottom and just start to shimmer, with maybe a wisp of smoke. The batter is right when it ribbons off the spoon and folds back on itself slowly. I never watched a clock on cornbread. When the smell changes from raw meal to toasted corn, and a thin dark line shows where the edge pulls away from the iron, it is done. If you would rather trust a toothpick, it should come out clean from the middle.

TROUBLES FIXED

- *Pale, soft bottom instead of a brown crackly crust:* The skillet was not hot enough when the batter went in. Give the empty iron a full 10 minutes in a 450 oven, and drop the drippings in only when you are ready to pour.
- *Stuck and tore coming out:* The drippings did not get up the sides. Swirl them all the way around, and let the cornbread sit 5 minutes after baking so the crust lets go.
- *Dry and crumbly:* Too little buttermilk, or it baked too long. The batter should pour thick, and the cornbread comes out the minute the top is golden and the edges pull away.
- *Heavy, gummy middle:* Too much buttermilk, or it came out early. Bake the full time, till a toothpick in the middle comes out dry.

Cream Gravy from the Skillet

The gravy that goes over everything down here — made right in the skillet the chicken came out of, out of the browned bits and a little grease, flour, and milk. Nothing wasted.

A WORD FROM RUBY

— Don't you dare wash out that skillet after you fry — all that browned-up business stuck to the bottom is pure flavor, and it's the whole reason this gravy tastes like something. This is cream gravy, what some folks call white gravy, and once y'all have got the feel of it you'll make it for chicken, for pork chops, for biscuits, for a plate of nothing-much to stretch it into supper. It's three cheap things and a wooden spoon.

WHAT YOU NEED

- 3 to 4 tablespoons of the frying grease, with the browned bits left in the skillet
- 3 to 4 tablespoons all-purpose flour

- 2 1/2 to 3 cups milk (whole milk's best), warmed if you think of it
- Salt
- Plenty of black pepper

HOW IT'S DONE

1. Pour off all but 3 or 4 tablespoons of the grease, but leave every bit of the browned crumbs stuck to the skillet. Set it over medium heat.
2. Whisk the flour right into the warm grease and let it cook, whisking, about 2 minutes, till it smells toasty and goes the color of sand. That cooks the raw taste out of the flour — don't rush it.
3. Pour the milk in a little at a time, whisking hard the whole while so it stays smooth. Scrape the bottom as you go to lift all those browned bits up into the gravy.
4. Let it come to a low bubble and cook, stirring, 3 to 5 minutes, till it thickens up enough to coat the back of the spoon. Salt it, and pepper it heavier than you think — cream gravy wants a lot of black pepper.

THE BY-FEEL WAY

— I know it's right by the back of the spoon. Dip the spoon, lift it, and drag your finger straight through the gravy coating the back of it. If the line holds clean and the gravy doesn't run right back and fill it in, it's ready. If it runs back together, it's still too thin — cook it a minute more. And if it sets up too thick on you while it sits, just whisk in a splash more warm milk off the heat to loosen it back. It ought to fall off the spoon in a thick ribbon, not sit there in a lump.

TROUBLES FIXED

- *It went lumpy:* You added the milk too fast, or didn't cook the flour smooth first. Whisk the flour into the grease smooth, then add the milk in slow splashes, smoothing each one before the next. Already lumpy? Whisk it hard over the heat, or pour it through a strainer once.
- *It tastes like raw flour and paste:* You didn't cook the flour-and-grease long enough before the milk went in. It needs those 2 minutes to toast, and then a few minutes at a low bubble.
- *It never thickened:* You shorted the flour or didn't let it bubble. Keep it over medium and keep stirring — it thickens fairly sudden near the end, so don't lose your nerve and quit early.
- *It set up stiff as pudding:* Cooked a hair too long, or heavy on the flour. Whisk in warm milk, a splash at a time, off the heat, till it pours right.

Cook those three till they come easy, and you'll have the feel of the black skillet in your hands. Everything else in the book is just that same knowing, pointed at something new.

— Ruby Dawson

Georgia Peach Cobbler

Every summer, the first good peaches off the truck at the roadside stand mean the oven goes on at my house, and this is the cobbler that comes out of it, the butter-first kind, with a crust that climbs up around the fruit all by itself.

A WORD FROM RUBY

— There are two kinds of cooks when it comes to a peach cobbler, the ones who stir it and the ones who leave it be, and only the second kind ever gets the crust. The butter melts in the dish first. Then the thin batter goes in right on top of the butter, and the peaches go on top of that, and then you walk away from it. It will look wrong. It will look like the batter is drowning the fruit, and every nerve in your hand will want to give it one little stir. Don't. The batter rises up through and around the peaches as it bakes, and the hot butter crisps the edges, and you end up with a golden crust on top and a soft, custardy layer underneath. That only happens if you keep the spoon out of it. Use peaches that are truly ripe, soft at the stem end and sweet to smell, because a hard peach tastes like nothing and no amount of sugar will fix that, y'all.

WHAT YOU NEED

- 1/2 cup (1 stick) butter
- 1 cup self-rising flour (or 1 cup plain flour with 1 1/2 teaspoons baking powder and 1/4 teaspoon salt stirred in)
- 1 cup sugar
- 1 cup sweet milk (whole milk)
- 6 medium ripe peaches, about 4 cups sliced
- 1/2 cup sugar, for the peaches (3/4 cup if they are tart)
- 1 tablespoon lemon juice
- 1/2 teaspoon cinnamon
- 1 tablespoon sugar, for sprinkling the top

HOW IT'S DONE

1. Heat your oven to 350 degrees. Put the butter in a 9 by 13-inch baking dish and set it in the oven just till it melts, 5 to 8 minutes. Watch it so it doesn't brown.

2. While the butter melts, peel the peaches. Dip each one in boiling water for 30 seconds, then in cold water, and the skins slip right off. Slice them off the pit into a bowl and toss with the 1/2 cup sugar, the lemon juice and the cinnamon. Let them sit while you mix the batter so they make their own juice.
3. Whisk the flour, the 1 cup sugar and the milk together in a bowl till smooth. Pour the batter right over the melted butter in the hot dish. Do not stir.
4. Spoon the peaches and all their juice over the batter. Do not stir. Sprinkle the last tablespoon of sugar over the top.
5. Set the dish on a baking sheet to catch any drips and bake 45 to 55 minutes, till the crust is deep golden and puffed up around the peaches and the juice is bubbling at the edges. A toothpick pushed into the crust should come out clean.
6. Let it sit 15 minutes before you spoon it out. It is molten, and the juice thickens as it cools. It is good with vanilla ice cream, and it is good with nothing at all.

THE BY-FEEL WAY

— I never measured peaches at the stand. I bought them by the smell, and by pressing a thumb gently at the stem end, where a ripe one gives a little. In the oven I go by the edges. The crust that climbs the side of the dish goes darker than the middle, the color of a biscuit bottom, and the whole kitchen smells like warm caramel. If the middle still shivers like loose batter, give it ten more minutes. If the peaches are very juicy and the juice is working its way up the sides of the dish, you are close.

TROUBLES FIXED

- *The crust never came up and it looked like peach pudding:* You stirred it. Pour the batter into the butter, set the peaches on top, and keep your spoon out of it.
- *Doughy, raw-tasting middle:* It needs more time, or the dish was too small and the batter piled up thick. Use a 9 by 13 dish and bake till a toothpick in the crust comes out clean. If the top is dark before the middle sets, lay a sheet of foil loose over it.
- *Runny and soupy:* Very juicy peaches, or you cut it too soon. Spoon the peaches in with a slotted spoon and leave half the juice in the bowl, and let the cobbler rest a full 15 minutes before serving.
- *Tasted flat:* Hard peaches, or old self-rising flour that has lost its lift. Use ripe fruit and fresh flour.

A Pot of Pintos

A pot of pintos and a skillet of cornbread was the noon dinner at the peanut mill more days than I could count, and I never once heard a man ask for anything else.

A WORD FROM RUBY

— Now I am about to say something that will start an argument in any fellowship hall in Georgia, because you can soak pintos or not, salt them early or late, and somebody's mama did it the other way and swears by it. So I am fixin' to tell y'all how I do mine, and you do what suits you. I soak them overnight, because they cook up creamier. I boil them hard for ten minutes at the start, then turn them down to a bare simmer and never let them boil hard again, because a rolling boil splits the skins and gives you a muddy pot. And I hold the salt back till the beans are tender, because the ham hock has plenty already and a pot you have oversalted cannot be unsalted. The rest is patience. A pot of pintos is the cheapest good thing I know how to cook, and it fed more people than anything else that ever came off my stove.

WHAT YOU NEED

- 1 pound dried pinto beans (about 2 1/4 cups)
- 1 smoked ham hock, about 3/4 to 1 pound
- 1 medium onion, chopped
- 1 tablespoon bacon drippings (I never leave them out, but you can)
- 1 teaspoon salt, plus more to taste once the beans are tender
- 1/2 teaspoon black pepper
- hot water in a kettle, for topping up the pot

HOW IT'S DONE

1. Pour the beans out on a tray and pick through them for small stones and shriveled beans, then rinse them well. Put them in a big bowl, cover with water by 2 inches, cut off the kitchen light and let them soak overnight, about 8 hours. No time to soak? Skip it and add about an hour to the simmering.
2. Drain off the soaking water and rinse the beans. Put them in a 5-quart pot with the ham hock, onion and bacon drippings, and cover with fresh water by 2 inches, which is about 8 cups.
3. Bring the pot to a rolling boil over high heat and boil it hard for 10 minutes, skimming off the foam that rises. Then turn the heat down to medium-low so it barely bubbles, and set the lid on tipped a little.

4. Simmer 1 1/2 to 2 hours, running a spoon along the bottom now and again so nothing sticks. Keep the water at least an inch above the beans the whole time. When it drops, top it up with hot water from the kettle so the pot never quits bubbling.
5. When the beans are tender all the way through, stir in the 1 teaspoon salt and the pepper. Lift out the ham hock, pull the meat off the bone, chop it, and put it back in the pot.
6. With the back of a big spoon, mash a ladleful of beans against the side of the pot and stir them back in. Simmer uncovered 15 minutes more, till the broth turns thick and creamy. Then cut off the burner, put the lid on, and if you can stand it, let the pot rest half an hour. Taste, add salt a pinch at a time if it needs it, and serve in bowls with a skillet of cornbread (mine is in the first chapter). This feeds 8.

THE BY-FEEL WAY

— Blow on a spoonful of beans, and if the skins crack and curl back, they are done. My mama never set a timer on a pot of pintos. She fished out three or four beans from different spots in the pot and tasted them, and when they were soft clear through and the broth had gone creamy and a little thick, she cut off the burner and left the lid on for half an hour. That rest is when a pot of pintos comes together, so y'all do not skip it.

TROUBLES FIXED

- *Beans still hard after hours of cooking:* Old beans that have sat in the cabinet for years may never soften, so buy them from a store that sells a lot of them. And keep tomatoes, vinegar and pepper sauce out of the pot until the beans are tender, because acid keeps them hard.
- *Scorched on the bottom:* Bless your heart, every cook has done it. Do not scrape the bottom. Ladle the good beans into a clean pot, leave the burnt layer behind, add hot water, and finish them on lower heat.
- *Thin, watery broth:* Mash a ladleful of beans against the side of the pot, stir them in, and simmer uncovered 15 more minutes.
- *Split, mushy beans:* The pot boiled too hard. After the first 10 minutes it should barely bubble.

More where these came from

These five come out of **Meemaw Ruby's Recipe Box** — three cookbooks, four hundred fifteen recipes, every one set down the easy way, in big plain print, for the nights it's just you or you're plain wore out. If you'd like the whole box, it's waiting for you at **rubysrecipebox.com**.

Somebody taught me every one of these. Now you go teach somebody.