

BY THE BOOK

From the Files of a Country Store

By AMANDA HESSER



IN 1987, when Carrie Brown and John Werner, the authors of "The Jimtown Store Cookbook" (HarperCollins, \$32.50), happened upon the abandoned Jimtown Store on a back road in Sonoma County, Calif.,

"it appeared frozen in time," they write. "Many of the original items still sat on the shelves, covered in dust and cobwebs. An antique cash register, pyramid displays of dry goods, and boxes of fishing lures were stacked in place on the worn wooden floor." "To revive Jimtown," they add later, "would mean the creation of a new kind of country store, one where the traditions of the past — courtesy, patient service, a 'meeting house' with friendly atmosphere — combined with real food, quality goods, and attention to detail."

Is this for real? Or is it the voice-over for a Robert Redford movie? For anyone who shops at a market with plastic displays and aggressive shoppers, it's a bit much. But when it stops, and the recipes — mostly for foods prepared and sold at the store — begin. I was hooked.

There is no clear focus to the collection of recipes and no ambition to teach you how to cook. With the help of Michael McLaughlin, the authors seem to have opened their recipe box and let its contents pour out. (Mr. Werner died before publication.)

Some of the best cookbooks over the past year or two have done the same thing. Rather than relying on the leaden, prescriptive approach to cookbooks of five years ago, authors have eased back to address one of the great pleasures and most personal parts of cooking: sharing recipes. Among the best are "Joanne Weir's More Cooking

in the Wine Country," "Room For Dessert" by David Lebovitz and "Recipes From Home" by David Page and Barbara Shinn.

I marked the page in the Jimtown cookbook for buttermilk pie, which the authors compare to a cheesecake. And it is like one, only fluffier, with a pale, pebbly crust, textured with cornmeal. The fennel salad with grapes and blue cheese was crunchy, tangy and delicious. A pork stew made with pob-

lano chilies and tomatilla salsa had a speckled, flavorful broth and soothing heat.

Had the weather been cooler, I would have made braised beef short ribs with coffee gravy. Had I had more time, perhaps I would have tried the red lentil soup with plum chutney and yogurt. And I still may. A recipe collection like this is idiosyncratic, and all of its odd and personal touches stick in your memory.

BUTTERMILK PIE

Adapted from "The Jimtown Store Cookbook" (HarperCollins, 2002)

Time: 40 minutes plus chilling and baking time

For the cornmeal crust:

- 1 cup unbleached all-purpose flour
- ¼ cup yellow cornmeal
- ½ teaspoon salt
- ¼ cup chilled unsalted butter, cut into small pieces
- 2 tablespoons chilled solid vegetable shortening, cut into small pieces

For the buttermilk filling:

- 3 large eggs
- ⅔ cup sugar
- 2 tablespoons unbleached all-purpose flour
- ⅛ teaspoon salt
- 3 tablespoons unsalted butter, melted and cooled slightly
- 1½ cup buttermilk
- 2 teaspoons vanilla extract.

1. Prepare the crust: Sift together flour, cornmeal and salt into a medium bowl. Prepare a small bowl or cup of ice water. Using a pastry cutter or two knives, cut butter and shortening into flour mixture until bits the size of peas remain. Sprinkle ice water over flour mixture, 1 tablespoon at a time, stirring with a fork until moistened. (Use 3 to 4 tablespoons, as needed.) Gather dough into a ball, and knead it a few times until it is smooth. Shape into a thick disk, wrap in plastic wrap and chill for at least 30

minutes.

2. With a lightly floured rolling pin, on a lightly floured surface, roll dough into an 11-inch circle. Transfer to a 9-inch pie plate. Trim overhanging dough to 1½ inches from rim, then tuck overhang under to form an edge. Flute the edge. Prick dough with a fork, and chill until needed.

3. Position a rack in middle of oven, and heat to 450 degrees. Separate eggs, putting yolks in a large bowl and whites in a medium bowl. Briefly whisk yolks, then whisk in ⅓ cup sugar, flour and salt. Stir in butter and then buttermilk and vanilla. Whisk until smooth.

4. Working by hand, or with a hand-held mixer, beat whites in their bowl until soft peaks form. Continue beating, adding remaining ⅓ cup sugar, 1 tablespoon at a time, until whites are stiff and glossy. Stir 1 cup of whites into yolk mixture; then spoon lightened yolk mixture onto remaining whites, and fold together. Pour filling into prepared pie shell.

5. Bake for 10 minutes, then lower temperature to 350 degrees and continue to bake until a knife inserted into custard comes out clean, 20 to 25 minutes. Cool pie on a rack before serving.

Yield: 6 servings.