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# LIFESTYLE

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## Dirt roads, dress shops and fancy French cooking

BY LAURA HUNT ANGEL

Every now and then it does one good to make a few changes. It helps keep the mind active and young. Even simple things can refresh our outlook and help us to see things from a different perspective. Often, that's why we take trips, rearrange furniture or buy a new car. Of course, that's not to say that it can't be a little stressful at times.

### VROOM AND BROOM

A few years into her forties, Mama decided to make some changes. It was as if the good Lord had lit a fire in her — a fire that made her stretch out and try some of the things that she had never been able to before. Mama's first baby had been born when she was just 15 years old, and the last came along the year that she turned 40. A good portion of her life had been taken up with having and raising babies. Beside that, she could barely hear, and that held her back from doing a lot of things too.

Now, though, it was time for something else. Life has a way of going by whether or not we take notice, and Mama seemed to have realized that. Knowing that he was up against it, Daddy just sort of went with the flow, but I think he secretly thought it was the menopause setting in.

The first thing Mama did was learn to drive. To drive! In a million years I never thought that would happen. Living where we did, it was possible to go to most of the places that Mama wanted to go by taking the back roads. She could even get to the mall by taking a dirt road almost the whole way. This was a good thing, because Mama was not a good driver.

Backing out of the driveway was always a hit and miss kind of thing for her. Each time, it took several tries, but eventually she would turn the steering wheel in the right direction and get out onto the main road. I'm not certain that she ever really figured out quite how she'd done it. Passengers, mostly us kids, knew better than to offer any advice. We just sat quietly and waited it out.

The most serious thing that ever happened occurred when Mama was in the car alone. She was driving along the dirt road on her way to the mall when, somehow, she lost control and jumped a ditch. Her vehicle took to the air, flew over the ditch and landed in somebody's front yard. No one — not Mama, innocent bystanders or even the vehicle — had a scratch. She went straight home and told Daddy about it. He was glad no one was hurt and told us that the Dukes of Hazzard had nothing on Mama.

Every week, Mama cleaned the church, which was also on a dirt road. After she got her driver's license, Daddy didn't have to take her to do the cleaning anymore. She usually took me with her, and I would sit at the piano, trying to pluck out hymns while she vacuumed, dusted and cleaned the restrooms. Mama was a woman who actually enjoyed housework, even at home. For her, cleaning the church was an opportunity to serve. With every sweep of the broom or swipe of the cloth, she worshiped the Lord with her full heart, and it showed on her face.

### MAMA BRANCHES OUT

Before we knew what was happening, Mama announced that she had gotten a job. She was going to work at a dress shop in the mall, pressing newly arrived clothes before they



A stack of crepes in a French pâtisserie await a myriad possible fillings.

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Photo by Laura Hunt Angel

Fried, apple-filled crepes made with low carb, gluten free crepes are shown.



Library of Congress

Helen Keller (seated, left) sits with Anne Sullivan, the "Miracle Worker" who taught her to communicate despite being blind, deaf and mute.

went out to the sales floor. It wasn't too different from what she would have been doing at home anyways, except that now she would get paid for it. Daddy could hardly believe it, but he tried to act like he was comfortable with the idea.

Mama absolutely loved her new job. For the first time in her life, she was able to interact with people other than her children on a daily basis. She came home smiling every day, energized and enlivened. Having a job seemed to bring Mama back to life. For a little bit each day, she was able to be "Barb" instead of Mama

— somebody that she hadn't been for a long, long time.

Money was not really the point of Mama's job, and most of what she earned went into buying clothes for all of us. After I married, she bought me a new coat, because the one that I had was actually a man's coat from the St. Vincent De Paul. It's been more than 30 years and I still have that coat.

Another thing that Mama enjoyed about her job was getting to eat lunch at the mall every day. For such a tiny woman, Mama loved to eat and was not afraid to try new foods.

When a restaurant specializing in crepes opened up, it quickly became her favorite.

Later, Mama decided to take a class in American Sign Language. Although she was already proficient at lip reading, the class made her feel more comfortable telling people that she was hard of hearing. She and my sister Lizzie had fun sending one another signs across a room if it was crowded or too noisy to speak.

Mama worked for a few years, but then gave it up to care for her mother, our Maw, who was nearly blind from the same eye ailment that would one day take Mama's sight, too. Mama didn't get the chance to drive very much anymore either, but she kept her license renewed. Just to prove she had done it, I guess. She didn't mind giving up these things. It was an opportunity to make up for all the years she had lived far away from her mother. And though she wasn't earning money anymore, Mama knew that was being paid with something a lot more precious than a check.

### THE RECIPES

Crepes, one of the things that Mama discovered while working, are usually considered a French creation. Yet, there are versions of them found in cultures around the globe. Included here are a couple of easy fillings, but there are literally hundreds of ways to serve these delicate pancakes.

#### Martha Stewart's Basic Crepes

It's best to make up the batter several hours, or even a day, ahead of time and let it chill thoroughly before making the crepes. Once cooked, crepes can be refrigerated or frozen for later use. Martha Stewart uses a whisk to blend the crepe batter, but I find that a food processor works just as well.

1 ¾ cups all purpose flour  
½ teaspoon salt  
2 cups whole milk, at room temperature  
3 eggs  
5 tablespoons melted butter, plus extra for brushing the skillet

Blend the flour and salt together in a medium bowl. In a separate bowl, whisk together the milk, eggs and butter. Pour the milk mixture into the flour and whisk until smooth. If necessary, strain to remove any lumps. Refrigerate the batter for at least two hours, up to overnight. When making the crepes, the batter should be the consistency of heavy cream; add a little more milk to the chilled batter if necessary.

Brush an 8-inch or 12-inch non-stick skillet with butter and heat it to medium-high heat. For 8-inch crepes, use about three tablespoons of batter; for 12-inch crepes use about ¼ cup. Ladle the batter into the hot skillet and cook for a minute or so, until the batter is set and the bottom begins to turn golden. Use a spatula to flip the crepe and cook 30-45 seconds more. Flip the crepe out onto a platter and repeat the process with the remaining batter, brushing the skillet with butter as needed. This will yield about 32, 8-inch crepes or 12, 12-inch crepes. (A 10-inch skillet will and ¼ cup batter will yield about 20, 8-inch crepes.) Tips: Dress up savory crepes by adding up to ¼ cup snipped fresh herbs to the batter; for dessert crepes, add two tablespoons of sugar and a teaspoon of vanilla or other flavoring. Wrap and refrigerate or freeze unused crepes.

#### Low-Carb, Gluten-Free Dessert Crepes

The title says it all; these crepes are especially diet-friendly. They also whip up in no time, and the recipe is easy to double, triple, etc. for a crowd.

6 eggs  
6 oz (¾ cup) cream cheese, softened  
2 tablespoons granulated sugar substitute  
¼ teaspoon salt  
1 teaspoon vanilla extract  
Butter for the skillet

Place all ingredients in a food processor and whirl until smooth. Butter a 10- or 12-inch skillet and heat it over medium high heat. Ladle ¼ cup of batter into the skillet and cook until top is set and covered with bubbles, 1 – 1 ½ minutes. Turn with a spatula and cook on the other side, 45 seconds to 1 minute, until golden. Flip out onto a platter and repeat with remaining batter, brushing skillet with butter as needed. Makes about 12, 6-inch crepes. Tip: I have also made an acceptable savory crepe from this recipe by omitting the sweetener and vanilla.

#### Savory Chicken and Mushroom Crepes

12 large crepes  
1 tablespoon butter  
1 clove garlic, minced (1 teaspoon)  
1 small onion, diced fine (¼ cup)  
1 cup sliced button mushrooms  
2 tablespoons flour  
2 ½ cups milk  
2 cups shredded cooked chicken  
1 cup shredded Swiss or Gruyere cheese, divided  
½ cup heavy cream  
2 tablespoons snipped fresh tarragon, or 1 tablespoon dried  
Salt and pepper to taste

Spray a 9 x 13-inch pan with non-stick spray. Preheat oven to 350 degrees F. In a skillet on medium heat, melt the butter and add the garlic and onion. Saute just until tender, but not browned. Add the mushrooms and a saute until mushrooms are browned and most of the liquid has evaporated, 5-6 minutes. Sprinkle in the flour and cook, stirring often, about 1 minute. Add the milk and bring the mixture to a bowl, stirring constantly, until sauce is thickened. Remove 1 cup of sauce for topping. To the remaining sauce, stir in the chicken, half of the cheese and the tarragon. Let the mixture cool about 10 minutes. Line the center of each crepe with two well-rounded tablespoons of the chicken mixture, roll it up and place it in the prepared pan. Repeat with remaining crepes. Combine remaining 1 cup of sauce with the cream and remaining cheese; pour sauce over crepes and bake, covered, for about 30 minutes or until hot and bubbly. Serves six.

SEE COOKING/PAGE C3