

Her crab cakes were renowned

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■ Home cooking: *Helen Avalynne Tawes, first lady of Maryland, put state dishes on the tables at home and abroad.*

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SUN STAFF

Among collectors of cookbooks, former Maryland first lady Helen Avalynne Tawes' "My Favorite Maryland Recipes," a paean to old-fashioned Maryland cooking, is a highly-sought-after item.

And it is considered good fortune if one turns up a copy of the work, first published in 1964 by Random House, in a yard sale or on the shelf of a used book store.

Tawes, a Crisfield native, was married in 1915 to J. Millard Tawes, the governor from 1959 to 1967. He died in 1979.

Known as Lou to close friends, she studied music at the Peabody Conservatory in Mount Vernon Place and later sang on a Salisbury radio station. And while living in the governor's mansion, she wasn't the least bit shy about playing an electric organ, which prompted the governor to quip, "She's got more nerve than a jackrabbit."

While music may have had a place in her heart, it was in her kitchen, surrounded by black iron frying pans and a larder overflowing with the bounty of the Chesapeake Bay country, that Tawes truly excelled. She exulted in old-time, stick-to-the-ribs 19th-century fare while avoiding what she called "fancy seasonings."

Tawes thought that the best way to the heart of Maryland's voters was through their stomachs, so during her husband's successful 1958 campaign for governor, she handed out as campaign literature 12,000 copies of a booklet that featured 22 of her favorite recipes.

"Everybody wanted a copy of that cookbook," said state Comptroller Louis L. Goldstein at the time of her death in 1989.

A trencherman of some note, Goldstein, who died in 1998, was given permission by the first lady to raid her refrigerator anytime he was near the governor's mansion or her home overlooking the Little Annemessex River in Crisfield.

"Oh, my soul, she made the best pound cake. I would have four or five slices, with cold milk from the icebox. And she made the best crab cakes," he told *The Sun*.

The Maryland crab cake is a hallowed and time-honored representative of Free State gastronomy, with every cook claiming his or her cake to be better than someone else's.

It's one of those regional culinary creations that is generally awful anywhere else except where the waters of the Chesapeake lap the shore. It is a recipe that is continually tinkered with and modified by both professional and home cooks who debate and compare their results.

"It is unforgivable to mask the delicious, true flavor of crabs and oysters," Tawes said.

Craig Claiborne, the New York gastronome who died in January, once proclaimed of his first Maryland crab cake that its taste had come as "a devastatingly gratifying, unforgettable experience that could be likened to the first taste of a wild raspberry or homemade peach ice cream."

Tawes' crab cake used a pound of Maryland lump or crab claw meat to which she added two unbeaten eggs, 2 tablespoons of mayonnaise and a tablespoon of horseradish mustard. Seasonings included a ¼ teaspoon of salt, ½ teaspoon of pepper, a dash of Tabasco sauce and a tablespoon of chopped parsley.

After mixing lightly, she formed the mixture into a cake or croquette. She advised not to pack the cake firmly. She then rolled out a package of crackers into fine



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In the kitchen: *Helen Tawes told Louis Goldstein he was free to raid her refrigerator.*

crumbs. Prepared cracker crumbs were not to be considered.

Crumbs were then patted lightly on the crab cake which was fried in deep fat until a golden brown. After draining on a paper

towel, they were to be served hot.

In 1963, Sen. J. Glenn Beall, a Maryland Republican, denounced the so-called "Maryland crab cake" being served in the U.S. Senate dining room as tasting like "sawdust."

In a fit of bipartisanship, he proceeded to give the Senate chef Tawes' recipe, which immediately found favor with the senators and successfully redeemed the reputation of the Maryland crab cake.

However, as traditional a cook as Tawes was, in a burst of culinary creation, she whipped up the "crab burger," a fast-food version of the crab cake, that was served at the Maryland Pavilion at the 1964-1965 World's Fair in New York.

While living in the executive mansion, Tawes learned that British Prime Minister Winston Churchill was a devotee of terrapin soup.

After preparing a pot of the famous old Maryland soup, she had it carried directly to a waiting airplane by a state policeman. It was picked up by a messenger in London and taken directly to Churchill's home. He later sent Tawes a letter congratulating her on the preparation of the hearty soup.