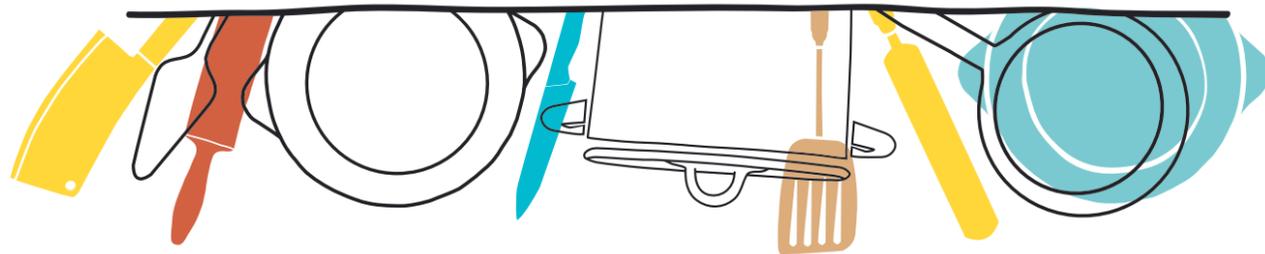




# How We Cook Now

*A new cookbook, a novice home chef, and a small kitchen  
all come together to see what happens*

WORDS ROBBIE TARPLEY RAFFISH RECIPES & PHOTOS CAPRI S. CAFARO



While I'd love to say that I cook and bake for family and friends with aplomb, the reality is I have always been an anxious, intimidated kitchen-dweller. I did not grow up cooking, so while I learned (mostly from my husband, a great cook) to make a decent family meal and could get a basic dinner party on the table, I often felt like an imposter.

Then came the pandemic. Without restaurants or initially even take-out, for the first time in my life I had to cook three meals a day. I quickly became bored with old standbys.

Being allergic to gluten sidelined me from the sourdough craze, so, instead, I began trying out recipes in my condo's galley kitchen. And with no one to please but myself, I loved it – the cooking and the eating.

As with many of you, COVID-19 has changed everything about how I cook and eat. So, no more hiding. I am putting down (most) of my anxiety and just trying new things. This column is about my attempts using some wonderful cookbooks, and what I am learning in the process. I hope you enjoy.



**United We Eat: 50 Great American Dishes to Bring Us All Together, by Capri S. Cafaro**

Nothing is more visible during election season than the political divide, so Capri S. Cafaro's *United We Eat* (Story Farm, Inc.) has not come a moment too soon. The former Ohio Senate Minority Leader, who served her northeastern district for the maximum three terms, has spent the majority of her career in public service, with particular focus on health and eldercare policy.

For Cafaro, food is hobby, passion and political tool. "I learned from a young age from my Italian-American family that food was a way to bring people together, creating fellowship in a more casual manner. So, when I served in the Ohio Senate, I used to bring in baked goods, especially to celebrate bipartisan wins," she said.

The idea for the cookbook started during her political tenure. It simmered, if you will, until late 2018 when she began reaching out to current and former political leaders to solicit recipes. She was surprised at first by how quickly some legislators replied. "Kathleen Matthews from Maryland was the first to call. I interned with her at Channel 7 News in Washington D.C. and her recipe immediately reminded me of our family vacations on the Eastern Shore."

More recipes followed, and the book became a balance of Democrats (including three 2020 presidential primary contenders), Republicans and Independents, each of whom provided half of the recipes. The balance are recipes that Cafaro carefully researched for culinary profile, regional agricultural production, and recognition as a branded or official state food. She tried many in her own kitchen and sent those she could not test (she does not own a smoker, for instance, to test recipes such as Alaska Governor Pete Ricketts' BBQ Rub & Sauce) to her publisher's test kitchen for validation.

The book is beautifully art-directed and photographed, with down-to-earth, well-written recipes and clear directions. There are options spanning vegan to carnivore. And if you want to try sourdough, Wyoming

Governor Mark Gordon's recipe is included. All three recipes I tried were successful and delicious.

The project has opened new doors for Cafaro, who this fall launched a podcast called "Eat Your Heartland Out" on the Heritage Radio Network. Available on all major podcast platforms, it focuses on the foods of the American Midwest, an oft-overlooked area that Cafaro says is "rich in indigenous roots, incredible diversity of immigrant influence and agricultural resources."

When not cooking, she serves as the Executive in Residence at American University School of Public Affairs, is a Fellow at the Bipartisan Policy Center and in her spare time creates Italian baked goods on a local television station, harkening back to her own familial roots. And she has plans for a second cookbook about the recipes of U.S. territories including American Samoa, Guam, the Northern Mariana Islands, Puerto Rico, and the U.S. Virgin Islands.

Her hope for *United We Eat* is its own important recipe for bringing people together.

"Sharing heirloom recipes is humanizing and can break down barriers of even extreme partisanship," she said. "You may not like a person's politics, but when you share food and stories you can find things in common." 🍷

**Experience Level:**  
Beginner, Intermediate, Advanced

**Time Commitment:**  
minutes/hours

**Ease of finding ingredients:**  
1 - 5 star (hard to easy)

**Cost:**  
\$ - inexpensive, \$\$ - average, \$\$\$ - splurge

**Recipe directions:**  
1 - 5 star (muddled to clear)

**Taste:**  
1 - 5 star (poor to excellent)



Experience Level: Beginner  
 Time Commitment: 15 minutes  
 Ease of finding ingredients: 5 star  
 Cost: \$\$\$  
 Recipe directions: 4 star  
 Taste: 5 star

## Pride of Maryland Crab Cakes

Recipe by Kathleen Matthews, Current Chair, Maryland Democratic Party

Recipe adapted from Gunning's Seafood Restaurant

*With pre-cooked, pre-packed crab meat at \$35 a pound, this is a "special occasion" recipe for us—but far less expensive than if eight people ordered crab cakes in a restaurant. Being conservative, I bought two pounds of crab meat (it calls for three) and adjusted the recipe by a third. They tasted wonderfully flavorful and I still made eight (8) crab cakes that were big enough to fill large sandwich buns.*

Makes 8 crab cakes

### INGREDIENTS

- 3 pounds finest quality lump crabmeat
- ¼ teaspoon salt
- 2 teaspoons freshly ground black pepper
- 2 teaspoons Old Bay seasoning
- 1 cup crushed saltine crackers
- 3 eggs, beaten
- 3 tablespoons mayonnaise
- 3 tablespoons Dijon mustard
- Worcestershire sauce, to taste

### DIRECTIONS

Set oven to broil. Spread crabmeat evenly over a large sheet pan. Sprinkle salt, pepper, Old Bay, and crackers over the crabmeat. In a mixing bowl, combine eggs, mayonnaise, and mustard with crabmeat. Spritz generously with Worcestershire sauce. Mix thoroughly but lightly by hand. Gently form 8 cakes and place one inch apart on sheet pan. Broil 4-5 inches from flame (or on top rack) until golden brown, approximately 3 minutes.

*What I Learned: Pack the crab cakes a little tighter than recipe calls for or they may fall apart. We first broiled the cakes at the recommended 3 minutes, and found them good but not outstanding. At my husband's suggestion, we broiled the last six cakes for a total of 5 minutes on each side, and they magically went from good to great! All they needed was to crisp and firm a little more.*

## Spinach Salad with Grilled Peaches & Honey Dijon Vinaigrette

Recipe by Capri S. Cafaro

*I had no idea Delaware grows more than two million peaches each year, almost all of them sold regionally. Cafaro writes that they were a Spanish import to the Delaware shores in the 1500s. This recipe was extremely flavorful and a big hit at dinner. The only change I made was that we used Boursin cheese (cow product) instead of feta or goat because of allergies, but any of them would be fine. The dressing held up in the fridge for several days until we ran out—and made more.*

Serves 2

### INGREDIENTS

#### For the Salad

- 1 cup fresh spinach
- 1 peach
- 1 tablespoon extra virgin olive oil
- ⅓ cup crumbled feta or goat cheese
- ⅓ cup pecans, chopped

#### For the Dressing

- 2 tablespoons honey
- 2 tablespoons Dijon mustard
- 2 tablespoons balsamic vinegar
- 2 tablespoons extra virgin olive oil
- 1 tablespoon soy sauce
- 1 clove garlic, minced
- Salt and pepper (to taste)

### DIRECTIONS

Rinse spinach and divide between two bowls. Halve and pit peach. Heat a grill or grill pan over medium heat. Brush peach with oil and place both halves flesh-side down. Grill peach until soft but not mushy, approximately 6-8 minutes. While peach is grilling, combine all dressing ingredients in a blender or food processor. You can also whisk by hand. Top spinach with grilled peach, cheese, and pecans, then drizzle with dressing.

*What I Learned: For stovetop grilling, oil the peaches but use non-stick spray on the pan for cleaner lines and easier clean-up. The caramelization was a sweet, bold and happy taste.*



Experience Level: Beginner  
 Time Commitment: 15 minutes  
 Ease of finding ingredients: 5 star  
 Cost: \$  
 Recipe directions: 5 star  
 Taste: 5 star

## Smith Island Cake

Recipe by Michael Steele, Chair, Republican National Committee (2009-11) and Maryland Lieutenant Governor (2003-2007)

Full disclosure, I had never baked one a layer cake before and I had a small anxiety attack before I started, but once I got the first layers in the oven and the icing started, I soon was building a slightly sloped but perfectly acceptable cake.

Makes 1 cake

### INGREDIENTS

#### For the Vanilla Cake

- 2 cups sugar
- 2 sticks (1 cup) unsalted butter, cut into chunks
- 5 eggs
- 3 cups flour
- ¼ teaspoon salt
- 1 heaping teaspoon baking powder
- 1 cup evaporated milk
- 2 teaspoons vanilla
- ½ cup water

#### For the Chocolate Icing for the Ten Layers

- 2 cups sugar
- 1 cup evaporated milk
- 5 ounces unsweetened chocolate
- 1 stick (½ cup) unsalted butter
- 1 teaspoon vanilla

### DIRECTIONS

Preheat oven to 350 degrees. In a mixing bowl, cream together sugar and butter using an electric mixer.

Add eggs one at a time and beat until smooth. Sift together flour, salt, and baking powder. Mix into egg mixture one cup at a time. With mixer running, slowly pour in evaporated milk, then vanilla and water. Mix until uniform. Using a serving spoon, spread three spoonfuls of batter into 10 individual 9-inch lightly greased pans, using the back of the spoon to spread evenly. Bake 3 layers at a time on the middle rack of the oven at 350 degrees for 8 minutes. A layer is done when you hold it near your ear and you don't hear it sizzle. (Start making the icing when the first layers go in the oven. Put the cake together as the layers are finished.)

To make the icing, pour sugar and evaporated milk into a medium pan. Cook over medium-low heat until warm, stirring constantly. Add chocolate and cook to melt. Once chocolate has melted, add butter. Cook over medium heat at a slow boil for 10-15 minutes, stirring occasionally. When combined, add vanilla. Icing will be thin but will thicken as it cools. As each batch finishes baking, let layers cool for 3 minutes in the pans. Run a spatula around the edge of the pan and ease each layer out of the pan. Don't worry if it tears; no one will notice when the cake is finished. Use 2-3 serving spoonfuls of icing between each layer. Alternate cake and icing until all ten layers have been assembled. Cover the top and sides of the cake with the rest of the icing. Push icing that runs onto the plate back onto the cake. Allow cake to cool before serving.

*What I Learned: A lot. One shopping tip: most unsweetened chocolate bars are four ounces – make sure to buy two. In terms of baking, my initial layers were too thick, so I only completed nine (9) instead of the traditional ten (10). By the third round of three pans, however, I had down the technique of thinning out the layers to slightly thicker than a crepe. In my oven the layers took longer to cook – the “sizzle” tip in the recipe is a good one. I should have cooked my icing at a more even temperature, though. I got some grittiness from where the sugar did not melt quite enough. All that said – no one volunteered to give back a slice!*

Recipes and photos from *United We Eat: 50 Great American Dishes To Bring Us All Together* by Capri Cafaro, Story Farm (July 4, 2020)

Experience Level: Intermediate  
Time Commitment: 1 hour or so  
Ease of finding ingredients: 5 star  
Cost: \$\$  
Recipe directions: 5 star  
Taste: 5 star



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