

Foolproof* Fudge

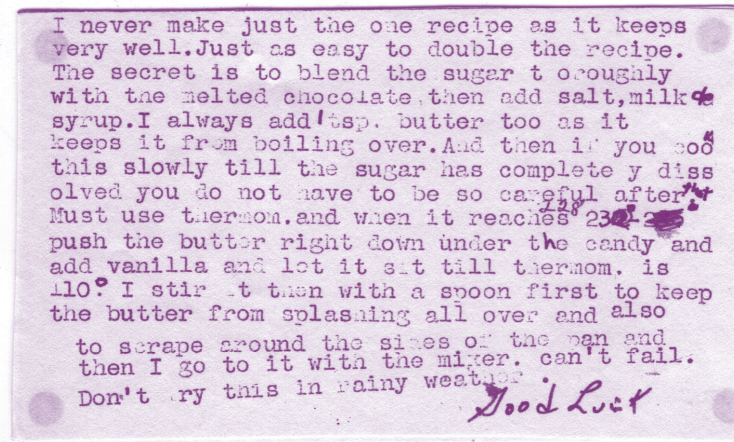
BY DIANE RUGGIE

My mother died 16 years ago. That's a long time to keep those little movies of her playing in my memory. But nearly all of the ones that still roll are of her in the kitchen.

I loved cream puffs and she made them often. I can picture her hugging the metal pot in the nook of her left arm and beating each egg with a wooden spoon in her right. Thwap-thwap-thwap. Rest. Thwap-thwap-thwap. Rest. Her cooking was part chemistry lesson, part workout, all love. Once she told me kneading bread was the best way to get over an argument.

But none of my memory movies are as clear as the one of her making fudge. Or I should say, the finale of fudge-making because I have no recollection of the beginning or middle. I can only picture her bright, twinkling eyes as she poured the ribbon of chocolate into the pan. Back then those eyes meant, "Oh, this is going to taste good!" But when I look at her recipe now, I wonder whether they really meant, "Hey! Look at that! It worked!"

The recipe is titled, Fudge. Deceptively simple, right? But I sense some intensity, some nerves, in the very presence of this un-ruled index card. Both sides are jammed with her instructions, plunked out on an old Smith Corona in 12 point type. Still, she penned tiny additions in every available corner. Mix well, she counsels. (The underline is hers.) Cook slowly. Let sit (untouched) till thermometer goes down to 110°. Untouched? Really? That just makes me want to pick up a spoon and poke around a bit. And believe me this apple didn't fall far from the



tree so I'm sure she dumped out several batches doing the same.

Then there's the detail of the "cook to" temperature. She mentions it no less than three times. It looks as if 228° might be the magic number. Certainly not 230°. She crosses that one out twice. "Watch closely the last 5 minutes," she advises to any cook bold enough to give it a go, "[It] will jump fast after 225°–228°. Use the glass thermometer with the green top." Okay, try Googling that one. I've only found red- or yellow-topped glass thermometers. With a margin of error of three degrees am I going to risk the recipe on a thermometer with the wrong colored top?

As if to soothe me, she shifts to first person on the backside of the card. Thank goodness no more of that stilted tsp./tbsp. voice; it only adds to my anxiety. Finally she writes in full sentences! "The secret is to blend the sugar thoroughly," she types. "And then if you cook this slowly till the sugar has completely dissolved you do not have to be so care-

ful after that." Great. I'm there. I'm doing it. I'm watching my thermometer (sure, it's yellow-topped, but whatever) and it's climbing...222°...223°...225°...she's right! It jumped to 228°! And off we go with butter, vanilla, and one clean sweep of the spatula around the sides of the pot.

Now, don't touch! It's an underlined order!

Hmmm. Should I have swiped the pot clockwise or counter clockwise? What if I'm in the northern or southern hemisphere? Right or left handed? She says, "Don't try this in rainy weather," but today is snowy. Is snow as wet as rain? Who's she kidding when she writes, "Can't fail"? This recipe has failure written all over it.

Look! The yellow-topped thermometer now reads 110°. It's time to "go to it with the mixer," she says. Wow, it IS losing its luster! Hey! Look at that! It worked! I think my eyes might even be bright and twinkling as I pour it in the fudge pan. "Good Luck," she signs off on the bottom. Thanks Mom. I needed it. **R**