

Wilson, Nancy Grady: Making Something Good ^[1]

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Nancy Grady Wilson: Making Something Good

by David Cecelski. "[Listening to History](#) ^[2]," *News & Observer*. Published 10/14/2007. Copyrighted. Reprinted with permission.

I visited Nancy Grady Wilson at her home in the Wesley Chapel community, in Duplin County, 80 miles southeast of Raleigh. A retired elementary school teacher, she is legendary there for making delicious homemade desserts and sharing them with neighbors, friends and family. At church homecomings and family reunions, all eyes turn toward the dessert table when Mrs. Wilson sets down a pound cake, blueberry cobbler, apple dumplings, strawberry shortcake or grape-hull pie. Many of her ingredients come from her and her husband Snodie's farm.

I visited when the muscadine grapes were ripe, and we talked about history, baking and the sweet things in life.

In Nancy Grady Wilson's words:

I was born in Wayne County at my grandmother's on a cold, snowy winter's evening in 1939. It was near Dudley, the little crossroads of Dudley. It was a beautiful old house in a pecan grove. My father was just a plain dirt farmer with very little. One of my earliest memories is sitting on a stool in the kitchen and watching my mother make biscuits and flour bread and thinking that, one day, I'm going to be able to do this, too.

My mother preserved strawberries, figs, pears, grape hulls, sometimes plums. We would pick up pears from the tree on the farm, and I would help her peel them. She would put them in a big pan, and she would layer the pears and sugar. She would put them on to simmer. She would jar them up, and they would smell so good. Oh, they smelled so good!

Each August, we would go up to Aunt Betty's and pick figs. We would wash the figs, stem them and peel them. We would boil them in very, very little water. She always liked for the fruit to make its own juice, and it was much richer and better. She preserved right many grape hulls too. They were muscadines from our vine. Her recipe was very simple.

Stem grapes and pop them to get the pulp out. Boil the pulp and put it in a sieve to get the seeds separated. Put liquid and pulp, without seeds, in grape hulls and boil with sugar, cup for cup. Pour in sterilized jars and seal.

I also learned how to make grape-hull pies from Mama. But this is an old, old recipe that my Aunt Clarissa's friend, Inez Surrat, gave her. It goes back a ways.

Take 1 quart of cooked grape hulls, 2 cups of sugar, 1 large can of milk, 3 heaping tablespoons of flour or corn starch, 4 egg yolks, 1 tablespoon of vanilla flavoring and 3 baked pie shells.

Pour grape hulls, sugar and milk in thick double boiler. Cook on medium heat. Beat egg yolks and add gradually, cooking altogether. When mixture begins to boil, add flour, stirring until thick. Add vanilla flavoring.

Pour filling into baked pie shells and top with meringue. Brown at 350 or 400 degrees.

Now here's a grape-hull pudding recipe with scuppernon grapes. That dates way back too. This is another of my Aunt Clarissa's, but it came from her cousin, Lou Nell.

Combine 2 cups cooked grape hulls with the juice and pulps; 2 cups, packed full, bread crumbs or cold biscuit; 1 cup sugar (optional); 2 eggs; 2 cups, sweet milk; 1 teaspoon of vanilla.

Pour into greased pan. Cook until golden brown.

I love cooking. I can get in the kitchen and, really, it's good therapy for me. If something has happened that is not upbeat or is unsettling, I can lose myself mixing up something.

I remember when my mother was very ill and it looked like the inevitable was about to happen, I came home from the hospital. I was very despondent. I felt like I had to get away for a while.

I thought, I have got to get in the kitchen and make something. And for me, that's always a dessert.

You know, when there are so many things in life that you have no control over, you can be bitter or you can try to do something better. I opt to do something better. I can drown my sorrows in a pound cake, and I can make something nice for myself. There is a time for everything. There was a time when I tried to do a lot more fancy things with food. Now I'm ready, at this stage of my life, to get back more to the basics. That seems deeply engrained in me.

It all comes from my upbringing, I'm sure: I came from stock that lived off the land and prepared what they had in hand and tried to make something good of it.

And you know, when I'm making grape-hull preserves now, I still have those memories of my mother in the kitchen and that wonderful smell in late August or September. She would be simmering those grapes and you walked in the house and

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