

CELEBRATE *Everything!*

Author Debbi Covington shares the story of her latest cookbook and her passion for cooking.

Story by **MARY ELLEN THOMPSON** • Photography by **SUSAN DELOACH**

In 1991 Debbi Baker Covington came to Beaufort as the bride of Vince Covington, her college sweetheart. Compared to Raleigh, NC where she had been living, moving to Ladys Island twenty-one years ago induced a state of culture shock for the vivacious Debbi. Her background was in advertising and her job in Raleigh had been in personnel management, so finding a job in Beaufort at that time was a bit challenging. However she settled in nicely to being the pastor's secretary at First Presbyterian Church.

Then one day, the proverbial fork in the road presented itself. A lady member of the church had her seventieth birthday approaching and a party was being planned. Debbi offered to prepare the food, the pastor gave her a budget, and on June 1, 1997 Debbi Covington catered her first party and has been doing it ever since. For eight years she worked both at the church and catered events, but in 2005, decided to take on the catering full time.

Cooking is not just a job for Debbi, it's her passion. She reads cookbooks instead of novels, she chooses magazines that focus on food, her food has been featured in *Southern Living Magazine* and *Better Homes and Gardens Magazine*. Debbi also writes the wildly popular column, *Everyday Gourmet*, in the *Lowcountry Weekly*. Not only have her recipes been featured in the Best Kept Secrets of *the South's Best Cooks* cookbook, she published her own cookbook, *Dining Under the Carolina Moon*, in 2005 and her new cookbook *Celebrate Everything!* will be released this June.

For someone who cooks for a living, does she still enjoy cooking at home? "I like to cook for myself and Vince, I make dinner every night. I especially like to make salads, I make amazing salads!" As

one who pays attention to every detail, she dissects what happens in a good salad: it should not be overdressed, it should have a good mixture of ingredients but not too many," (And you will never find Ranch dressing on her list of ingredients). "You don't want to have too much going on in one dish. All the different types of lettuces have a unique flavor; some taste peppery, tangy, sharp, or herby. Salad ingredients should focus on the season; for instance, in summer tomatoes should be a main ingredient because they're fresh."

How does she choose a restaurant when she wants to go out? "I basically choose the restaurant or the food that I can't or don't cook at home. I don't cook fried foods so sometimes I just want fried chicken. I really like Paninis fire-grilled pizza, I go to the Foolish Frog for their wreck fish, I like the wonderful outside porch at Sweetgrass; I love to go out for breakfast because egg dishes are the messiest to clean."

Is catering for so many people at all kinds of events really as easy as she makes it look? "Yes," she replies. "Basically it's a breeze for me because I love it so much. There are the few times when something unexpected happens, recently I catered a wedding and a family member made the wedding cake. The event was outdoors and it was very hot, the cake was really big and it started to lean to one side on the plate. I had to stuff cocktail napkins under one side of the plate to get it to look straight." Crisis averted. When questioned further if there is some drawback, some pitfall, to so much cooking, Debbi initially demurs but finally admits: "Sometimes I have spent so much time with that food I just get tired of it. I choose recipes, make a list of ingredients, go to the store, choose the ingredients, put the food in the buggy, take it out and put it on the conveyor belt,

get the bags out of the buggy and put them in my car, take them out of my car and take them into the kitchen. Then I take the food out of the bags, put it on the counter, put it away and then have to take it all out, assemble the ingredients, cook the food, pack the food, unpack the food, present the food and when that is over I have to pack up the leftovers. By then I may be tired of fussing with that particular dish; for instance if I've made chicken salad for 300 people, I just want a steak."

Debbi is the quintessential gracious hostess and that is one trait that carries her through functions where she is catering for hundreds of guests. The fact that she has a quick wit and wonderful warm smile are also assets to any event, she knows how to make anyone feel instantly at ease.

What is the biggest event she has ever done? "At the Yacht Club, there were supposed to be about one hundred people for a party, but the guest list grew and about four hundred and fifty people were there. It was not only a challenge feeding them in that size space, but it also stormed that night so everyone was inside! All went well though, everyone was fed and had a good time." What are her favorite events to cater? "Cocktail parties in people's homes - they're fun! Also fund-raisers because everyone seems so appreciative." Where does she buy her food? "Locally whenever possible!" She goes to Publix for many things but "I buy fresh local shrimp and fish off the boats, and vegetables and fruit at the local farmers markets; I use a butcher for some cuts of meat because it is already trimmed and ready to cook. Fish that isn't local, and difficult to find food items come from a food purveyor."

The Covington's home is so tastefully decorated that it looks like it should be





Photographer Paul Nurnberg and Debbi choose photos for her cookbook while Gizmo looks on.

featured in a magazine as well as Debbi's picturesque food. Husband Vince's expertise in his interior design business of window treatments gives every room just the right amount of privacy and takes advantage of the natural light. Unless you peek behind cabinet doors and can see all of Debbi's assortments of serving plates, dinner dishes, wine glasses, pretty and unusual serving pieces and implements, all of which is what she collects, you will gravitate to the art. "When we first got married we bought art, we spent all our extra money on art!" Debbi exclaims.

Eagerly awaiting the delivery of her new cookbook *Celebrate Everything!*, Debbi reflects on her first cookbook, *Dining Under the Carolina Moon*. "I knew a couple of people who had written cookbooks, and I had been writing for *Lowcountry Weekly* for awhile so I had a small following. The book was self-published and all 4000 copies sold, but I didn't think I would do another one. Then when my mother got sick and came to live with us, I decided maybe it was time to publish a new cookbook because she so encouraged me to do so; she was the foodie in the family and she was the

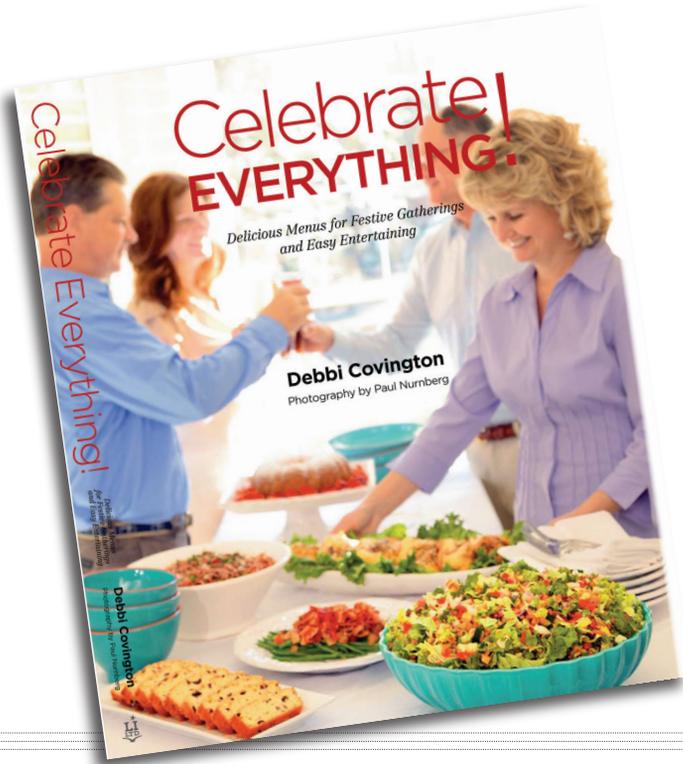
reason I was initially interested in food. My original thought was to have a group of photographers take the pictures but I soon realized that logistically that wouldn't work, so my friend Paul Nurnberg offered to do all the photography and I happily accepted. The way I got all my friends involved was to have them over to eat the food that I was featuring so I had parties that were photographed; there are forty of our friends in the book and I can't begin to tell you how many dirty dishes there were!"

Celebrate Everything! is in hardback with 216 pages of recipes with accompanying photographs. It will be available on Debbi's website: www.cateringbydebbicovington.com and will be sold in various locations in Beaufort. Debbi is going to "Take some time this summer and focus on the book because in summer it's too hot to eat anyway." Several non-profit organizations such as Beaufort Film Society, Historic Beaufort, CODA, and the Lowcountry Food Bank are going to host book signing parties where they will receive a percentage of the profits; Debbi will also host Celebration parties of her own. With

27 chapters all illustrating a celebration of some sort, there are over 200 recipes, 99 percent of which Debbi says are easy to prepare. All the recipes are new in this cookbook with one exception and that is Debbi's mother's famous Sour Cream Coconut Cake; like many cooks, Patricia Baker had a secret ingredient in her cake. In Debbi's first cookbook she published her mama's recipe; Mrs. Baker sold her coconut cake at church auctions and raised a goodly amount of money for her causes. She kept telling Debbi to add a bit of black walnut flavoring to the cake and when Debbi finally did, she knew that little bitty one thing made a big difference. Also, Debbi confides, "Refrigerate the icing overnight, it will stick to the sides of the cake better." If you want to know any more than that you will have to buy the cookbook. It took her eight months to write it so we're not giving away any more of her secrets.

With a summer full of projects ahead of her and the cookbook on its way, Debbi's signature good humor shines as she smiles and says, "The whole thing was just fun!"

Sour Cream Coconut Cake



Big, beautiful, moist and delicious! This is one of the recipes for which my mother was famous! Bake and frost the cake at least three days before you plan to serve it. It actually gets better with age.

- 1 (24-ounce) carton sour cream
- 1 cup sugar
- 1 (14-ounce) package sweetened flaked coconut
- 1 (18.25-ounce) yellow cake mix
- 1 teaspoon black walnut extract (optional)

Combine sour cream, sugar and coconut in a medium mixing bowl. Cover and refrigerate for 2 hours. In the meantime, prepare cake according to package directions, with the addition of 1 teaspoon black walnut extract, making two 8-inch layers. When completely cool, split both layers making 4 cake rounds. Reserve 1½ cups sour cream-coconut mixture. Spread the rest between layers. Frost cake with reserved sour cream-coconut mixture. Seal in an airtight container. Refrigerate for three days before serving. Serves 10 to 12.