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TELEVISION

Food is essential piece of Florida writer's story

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FOOD

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Marjorie Kinnan Rawlings was one of Florida's great writers of native culture. Her words painted vivid images of life here in the 1930s -- eloquent words that still hold up to this day.

In addition to immersing herself in the culture and customs of those who lived near her homes in Cross Creek and Crescent Beach, Rawlings was a renowned hostess and cook. Many historians feel she never gave enough credit to her faithful workers who taught her much about the land and how to make the most of harvests. Nevertheless, Marj loved a good dinner party.

Her love of food was why, in 2006, I was invited to play a bit part in a wonderful project with my dear friend Leslie Kemp Poole and Equinox Documentaries. The result was *In Marjorie's Wake*, which will air at 9 p.m. Monday on WMFE-Channel 24 (it will be repeated at 11 p.m. April 23).

It was not uncharted territory for Leslie and me. In 1995, we retraced Marj's trip on the St. Johns River with her friend Dessie Prescott that became the "Hyacinth Drift" chapter of Rawling's *Cross Creek*. And we wrote about our experience in the *Sentinel's Florida* magazine.

In Marjorie's Wake is a different approach. Instead of re-enacting the trip, it revisits the river through modern eyes. On this trip, educator and singer-songwriter Jennifer Chase of Jacksonville hopped on board and created a wonderful original soundtrack for the film. And Jen's fabulously quirky and playful spirit added fresh eyes indeed.

But it's hard to tell a story about Rawlings without food. It just wouldn't be right. So Leslie convinced Equinox's Bill Belleville and Bob Giguere, producers of the film, that a food component was needed.

Thus began my Marjorie Kinnan Rawlings' version of *Babette's Feast* in the fall of 2006. My husband Spencer Pettit and I met the entire crew plus a few friends and neighbors on Drayton Island in Lake George for a Marj- and Dessie-inspired meal.

Our hosts were Bill Jeter and Deanne Clark who helped schlep a large grill, two coolers of food and boxes of dry goods from Georgetown to the island via boat.

My menu was pure Florida with modern twists: fried okra, baked gator fritters, Dessie's favorite crab cakes, Smoky gouda grits with sweet corn kernels, herb-marinated tomatoes with artichokes and garlic, avocado wedges, roasted chicken with bourbon-carambola glaze, pork tenderloin with rum-infused citrus glaze, roasted green bean bundles tied with green onions and red bell pepper strips, grilled eggplant, orange ice box cake (adapted from *Cross Creek Kitchens* cookbook) and homemade mango ice cream sandwiches made with fresh-baked snickerdoodle cookies.

Jeter and Clark provided wine for all. We went with French wines and champagne that would have intrigued Marj in her post-Pulitzer Prize winning heyday. She would have demanded only the best. I felt a bit like chef Robert Irvine from the Food Network's *Dinner: Impossible*, but with the help of Jeter, Clark and my husband, the whole meal came together in about four or five hours.

For foodies, there is nothing more exhilarating than spending hours in the kitchen to create a celebratory feast. I was in heaven. The next morning we loaded up the crew's small fleet with leftovers and tagged along in Deanne's boat to watch some of the filming at Salt Springs.

To celebrate *In Majorie's Wake's* local PBS debut, I've posted all the recipes and a cooking journal at my blog OrlandoSentinel.com/thecookinggal. There's a link to Equinox Documentaries there as well.

I have traveled the river from Jacksonville to Sanford for pleasure more than 8 times with the Antique and Classic Boat Society. In 2002, I was fortunate to be part of a team of reporters that traveled the St. Johns from the headwaters near Fort Drum to the Atlantic Ocean for an Orlando Sentinel special report on Florida's water crisis.

But the trip in 1995 with Leslie I won't long forget. Dessie Prescott was still alive at the time and helped us chart our course. It was a celebration of a friendship forged at the University of Florida in the 1970s and the experience culminated in the thrill and satisfaction that comes from intimately knowing a river.

I hope *In Marjorie's Wake* inspires more people to chart their own voyages of discovery. The food along the way can be quite swell.

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