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The Taffy Pull (A Story and a Recipe)

By LeAnn R. Ralph

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by: **LeAnn R. Ralph**

One year when I was growing up on our Wisconsin dairy farm, the Brownie leaders had announced we were going to make some extra-special candy at our next meeting.

So — when school let out one winter afternoon — I lost no time getting to the gym where we always had our meetings.

For once nobody was late, and when we entered the gym, the Brownie leaders already had everything set up.

"What's in the pans?" asked one girl.

On the table were several square cake pans full of some clear caramel-colored stuff.

"That's our taffy," explained one of the leaders.

The questions came fast and furious then.

"What do we have to do?"

"What's taffy, anyway?"

"But I thought WE were going to make candy..."

"You are," one of the leaders said. "This is called saltwater taffy. Cooking it is the very hardest part but now just the fun part is left — making it."

We looked back and forth amongst ourselves. If the candy was already cooked, what else was there?

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"First we want you to wash your hands. And use lots of soap and warm water. Don't just rinse, either," the other leader continued.

One girl spoke up. "Why do we have to wash our hands like that?"

"Because you're going to put them in the taffy, so they have to be very clean," the leader answered.

Put our hands IN the candy? Hmmm, maybe the fun part WASN'T already done...

A little while later when we returned from our hand-washing expedition, the leader was busily working something back and forth between her hands.

"What's THAT?" asked one girl.

"This," she said, "is taffy. And it's almost ready."

The mass of stuff she held was light and cream-colored.

"Where'd it come from?" another girl asked.

"There," the leader replied, nodding toward the table.

The cream-colored glob in no way resembled what was in the pans.

"How'd it get like THAT?" another girl asked.

Both the leaders laughed.

"It's what happens to taffy when you pull it like this."

We watched for another five minutes.

"There," she said, "it's done." She laid the taffy on a piece of wax paper, rolled it into a rope, and then quickly cut it into sections with a pair of scissors.

"Now I want you to taste it," she instructed.

No problem there...

"This is good!"

"Chewy."

"Tastes a little like caramel."

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The leader smiled. "Rub butter on your hands," she instructed, "then grab some taffy...and start pulling."

In no time at all, a dozen little girls wearing Brownie uniforms were industriously manipulating handfuls of taffy.

"This is FUN!" declared one girl.

"The funnest thing we've EVER done!" exclaimed another, nodding vigorously.

"Can we do it NEXT week, too?" asked a third.

"I told you just the fun part was left," the Brownie leader said.

When the taffy had reached the right consistency we cut it into pieces. Then the leaders produced some Baggies, and a little while later it was time to go home.

"Did you have fun today?" my mother asked as I got into the car. She had ridden into town with Dad to pick me up from the Brownie meeting.

"Look what we made!" I exclaimed.

My mother squinted at the bag of candy. "Why, that looks like the taffy we used to make in school. Wonder if it tastes the same."

I stared at my mother. She had gone to school in a one-room country schoolhouse about a mile from our dairy farm.

"You've made taffy?" I said.

She smiled. "Of course. We used to make it for Christmas. Wasn't much left by the time Christmas rolled around, though."

I held the bag toward her.

She popped a piece into her mouth and then nodded. "Tastes just the same."

Dad thought it was good, too.

And apparently so did everyone else in the family.

The next morning as I sadly contemplated the empty Baggie, I decided the Brownie leaders had been dead wrong.

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Making the taffy wasn't the best part — eating it was.

Saltwater Taffy

1 cup sugar

3/4 cup light corn syrup

2/3 cup water

1 tablespoon cornstarch

2 tablespoons butter

3/4 teaspoon salt

2 teaspoons vanilla (or another flavoring, such as peppermint or anise)

In a large saucepan, combine all ingredients except the vanilla. Stirring constantly, cook over medium heat until the mixture reaches 256 degrees Fahrenheit on a candy thermometer (or until a small amount dropped into a cup of cold water forms a hard ball).

Stir in vanilla. Pour into a buttered 8x8 square pan. Let cool.

Note: if you would like to make colored taffy, stir in a few drops of food coloring just before you add the vanilla or other flavoring.

When the mixture is cool enough to handle, rub a small amount of soft butter between your palms, take a handful of taffy and pull until it becomes stiff and lighter in color. Pull or roll into ropes and cut into pieces with a scissors.

To store the candy, let it sit for an hour or so and then wrap the individual pieces in plastic wrap or waxed paper.

LeAnn R. Ralph is the editor of the Wisconsin Regional Writer (the quarterly publication of the Wisconsin Regional Writers' Assoc.) and is the author of the book, *Christmas in Dairyland (True Stories from a Wisconsin Farm)* (trade paperback; August 2003). She is working on her next book, *Give Me a Home Where the Dairy Cows Roam*, which will be available later in 2004. Share the view from Rural Route 2 —

My Mother's Recipe Box

By Rachel Paxton

Remember the days when cookbooks weren't so readily available, and you or your mother relied on only one or two different cookbooks for cooking all of your family's meals? I still have my mother's old cookbooks, as well as my grandmother's. Each one is worn from age and use—if you flip through the tattered pages it is obvious which recipes were turned to time and time again. These cookbooks will always number among my most precious treasures.

When our mothers wanted to try new recipes, they most likely didn't run out and buy new cookbooks. They often didn't have the extra money to spend, and often there weren't very many to choose from. So where did they get new recipes? From each other.

When I was a child I remember my mother exchanging recipe cards with friends and relatives and bringing them home and filing them away in her recipe box. I always loved going through her recipes (although she often got mad at me for getting them all out of order!)

All the years while I was learning how to cook I went through her recipe box time and time again, pulling out my favorite recipes and preparing them again and again.

Seeing who the recipes were from made them all the more special. I also love looking back at all the recipe cards I prepared myself while I was in 4-H and spent much of my time learning how to cook. I still prepare many of the recipes I used back then. To this day, all I have to do is open my recipe card box, and I am instantly transported back in time.

My mother hasn't exchanged recipe cards with anyone in more than 20 years. I have very few of my own (although I hope to inherit hers someday!) But even to this day there is no better place to find favorite family recipes than in my mother's recipe box.

Twenty years from now, I look forward to going through my recipe box with my own daughter, telling her stories about where all of my different recipes came from.

Rachel Paxton is a freelance writer and mom who publishes the Creative Homemaking Recipe of the Week Club, a weekly newsletter that contains quick, easy dinner ideas and money-saving household hints. To subscribe send a blank e-mail message to

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