



COOKS

## MARIAN BURROS

BY MARIA BUTEUX READE | PHOTOGRAPHY BY BRENT HARREWYN

**T**he comforting aroma of butter, cinnamon and fruit fill Marian Burros's kitchen as she eases a warm torte from the oven. "I've made this recipe a thousand times yet I never tire of it," she says, reaching for a pint of vanilla ice cream (local, of course). With all that Vermont has to offer, no wonder this venerable cookbook author and cosmopolitan food journalist calls this state home.

Burros has been a devoted denizen of the Northeast Kingdom since the mid-1990s when she and her partner had a home in Glover. After he died, Burros knew she wanted to maintain roots in the Green Mountains and had good friends who lived in the area. "I spent the summer of 2009 searching for real estate. I'd take different groups of friends with me on house visits and get their input. I must have come to examine this house 11 times. Thankfully I had a very patient realtor...." Everyone agreed on the yellow clapboard home perched on a wooded hillside in Craftsbury Common with an expansive view to the east. "Sunrise comes early and strong here," Burros laughs, perhaps ruefully.

Burros's life in Craftsbury revolves around a calendar full of meals, events and outings with a wide circle of friends. This stylish woman, gifted at quietly connecting luminaries within the food world, splits her time between Bethesda, Maryland, and northern Vermont. Her home is immaculate and tastefully decorated. She loves antiques, and though she restrains herself now, she admits she's always on the hunt for "that one treasure that can still fit." A full 95% of her furnishings come from Vermont, and she delights in her collection of blue and white china and spongeware that see active use.

Not surprisingly, her open kitchen is ideal for entertaining, one of her hallmarks. The wide pine floorboards, dark wood cabinets and low ceilings create a cozy ambience, while the black polished-stone countertops provide ample space for food prep or buffet-style service. In the adjacent dining room, 13 guests in antique chairs can sit comfortably around the long table. Assorted couches and armchairs arranged in conversation klatches fill the living room. A screened porch offers respite from summer heat, as do padded chaises longues placed

under shade trees. Well-tended gardens and an array of stone crocks burst with colorful perennials, and Burros maintains a raised bed full of tomatoes, cukes, greens and herbs, including four types of basil.

So how did this catalyst find her way to Vermont?

While skiing (“for the first time in my life!”) at Bromley Mountain in the 1960s, Burros met the man whom she would later marry. “He must have loved my baggy wool ski pants,” she jokes with characteristic wryness. The couple moved to Washington, DC, where Burros began her career in journalism, working for local papers before assuming her role as food editor of the *Washington Post*. In 1981, Burros moved to New York and served as a food reporter and columnist for the *New York Times*, a 27-year career that paved the way for generations of food writers. “Early on, I realized that food writing wasn’t just about the food itself. It naturally involved politics, food safety, health issues. All the topics that now fall under the umbrella of sustainability.” She retired in 2008 yet still remains active in the world of food politics and journalism.

In October, Burros received an alumnae achievement award from Wellesley College for her contributions as a “Transformational Food and Lifestyle Journalist.” Other Wellesley alumnae honored for excellence in their respective fields include Hillary Rodham Clinton, Madeleine Albright, Nora Ephron and broadcasters Linda Wertheimer, Cokie Roberts and Diane Sawyer. “No one really wrote about food politics before,” Burros explains. “In fact, that phrase didn’t exist when I started. I have always been fascinated by the people and politics behind food.”

Burros’s entry into the world of food began with an index card box filled with recipes. “Back in the 1950s, people gave engagement gifts, and a fellow Wellesley alum, Lois Levine, and I couldn’t afford anything fancy.” So they compiled a set of their favorite recipes and shared it with their friends, who naturally encouraged the women to write a cookbook. “We ran around Lois’s bed collating all the pages by hand, a friend down the street made the cover, and we sold the cookbook in local bookstores.” They eventually offered *Elegant but Easy* as a fundraiser for the Wellesley Club of Washington. Other clubs around the country wanted it, and the book took off. Burros credits that cookbook, which arose from a humble set of recipe cards, as the debut of her career. She has since written 13 cookbooks, including *Cooking for Comfort*, published in 2003. *Elegant but Easy* remains her favorite. The book has sold more than 500,000 copies.

Burros praises Julia Child, Marion Cunningham and Alice Waters for their impeccable standards and for awakening people’s sensibilities to higher-quality food. She also acknowledges the *Joy of Cooking* as her Bible. “I got a copy when I first married and that’s how I learned to cook. It’s still my resource for technique. I’ve never had a failure with any of those recipes.” Burros recalls that tapioca pudding was the first dish she made from scratch as a child. “I knew no bounds when it came to consuming tapioca,” she chortles.

Today Burros describes herself as an omnivore, though she eats scant red meat and less pork than she used to. “Fish, chicken, lots of veggies and fruit, good bread and cheese—all of which are plentiful here in Vermont,” she adds.

A gracious host who banter easily, Burros believes in cooperative entertaining, or the orchestrated potluck. “A friend will volunteer to roast or grill something, someone else offers a salad or bread, and I’ll fill in the gaps with soup, dessert or whatever. When you only have to prepare one dish, you tend to bring something glorious,” she observes.

And the holidays? “We used to have Thanksgiving in Vermont. We always invited a cast of characters, and we would do turkey on the grill, even in snow and sleet! My partner oversaw that, not I.” Standard dishes included both white and sweet potatoes (mashed), Craig Claiborne’s corn bread stuffing, roasted baby carrots with dried cranberries, pine nuts and basil.

This vibrant maverick has no intention of slowing down and continues to serve as a trustee of Craftsbury’s Sterling College. “The college is focused on food, sustainability, health, saving the planet—all the things I care deeply about,” she says simply. Sure sounds like a Vermonter. 🍁

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Maria Reade can’t stop thinking about the pimento cheese spread she devoured at Marian’s house last summer...

## ORIGINAL PLUM TORTE

*When Amanda Hesser was compiling The Essential New York Times Cookbook in 2010, she solicited input from readers, and thousands of people submitted Marian Burros’s plum torte as one of their favorites. This classic recipe appeared in the Times eight years running. “I never tire of this! But since plum season is so short, you can easily swap out blueberries, apples or peaches. The torte freezes beautifully, so make a few ahead of time and reheat them in the oven.” This recipe first appeared in Elegant but Easy.*

Yields 8 servings

½ cup (1 stick) unsalted butter, softened

¾ cup plus 1 or 2 tablespoons sugar

1 cup unbleached flour, sifted

1 teaspoon baking powder

2 eggs

Pinch salt

12 ripe plums, halved and pitted

1 teaspoon cinnamon, or more to taste

Arrange a rack in the lower third of oven. Preheat oven to 350°.

Cream butter and ¾ cup sugar. Add flour, baking powder, eggs and salt. Beat to mix well. Spoon the batter into an ungreased 9- or 10-inch springform pan. Cover the top with plums, skin-sides down. Mix the cinnamon with the remaining 1 or 2 tablespoons sugar and sprinkle over the top. Bake for 40 or 50 minutes, until a cake tester inserted in the center comes out clean. Remove torte from the oven and let cool; refrigerate or freeze if desired. To serve, let the torte return to room temperature and reheat at 300° until warm. Serve plain or with vanilla ice cream or fresh whipped cream.



# W... apple-cranberry torte

1. Preheat oven to 350°F. Grease a 9-inch round cake pan with butter. Sift together 1 1/2 cups flour, 1/2 cup sugar, and 1/2 tsp salt. Cut in 1/2 cup butter until mixture resembles coarse crumbs. Press mixture into bottom and sides of pan. Bake 10 minutes. Cool. Peel, core, and slice 4 apples. Toss with 1/2 cup sugar and 1/2 tsp cinnamon. Spread over crust. Top with 1/2 cup cranberries. Bake 45 minutes. Cool. Cut into wedges.

# H... new-age apple-cranberry torte

1. Preheat oven to 350°F. Grease a 9-inch round cake pan with butter. Sift together 1 1/2 cups flour, 1/2 cup sugar, and 1/2 tsp salt. Cut in 1/2 cup butter until mixture resembles coarse crumbs. Press mixture into bottom and sides of pan. Bake 10 minutes. Cool. Peel, core, and slice 4 apples. Toss with 1/2 cup sugar and 1/2 tsp cinnamon. Spread over crust. Top with 1/2 cup cranberries. Bake 45 minutes. Cool. Cut into wedges.