



TAKE IT TO THE GRAVE

Rosie Grant taking Spritz Cookies to the grave of Naomi Odessa Miller-Dawson

Rosie Grant spends her time making cherished recipes that she finds on tombstones, then sharing her experiences on TikTok. Here's how a social media experiment focusing on death ended up changing her life

By Jennifer Chen

Spritz Cookies

By Naomi Odessa Miller-Dawson

Nov. 26, 1921 – June 10, 2009

Brooklyn, NY

1 cup of butter or margarine

$\frac{3}{4}$ cup sugar

1 tsp. vanilla

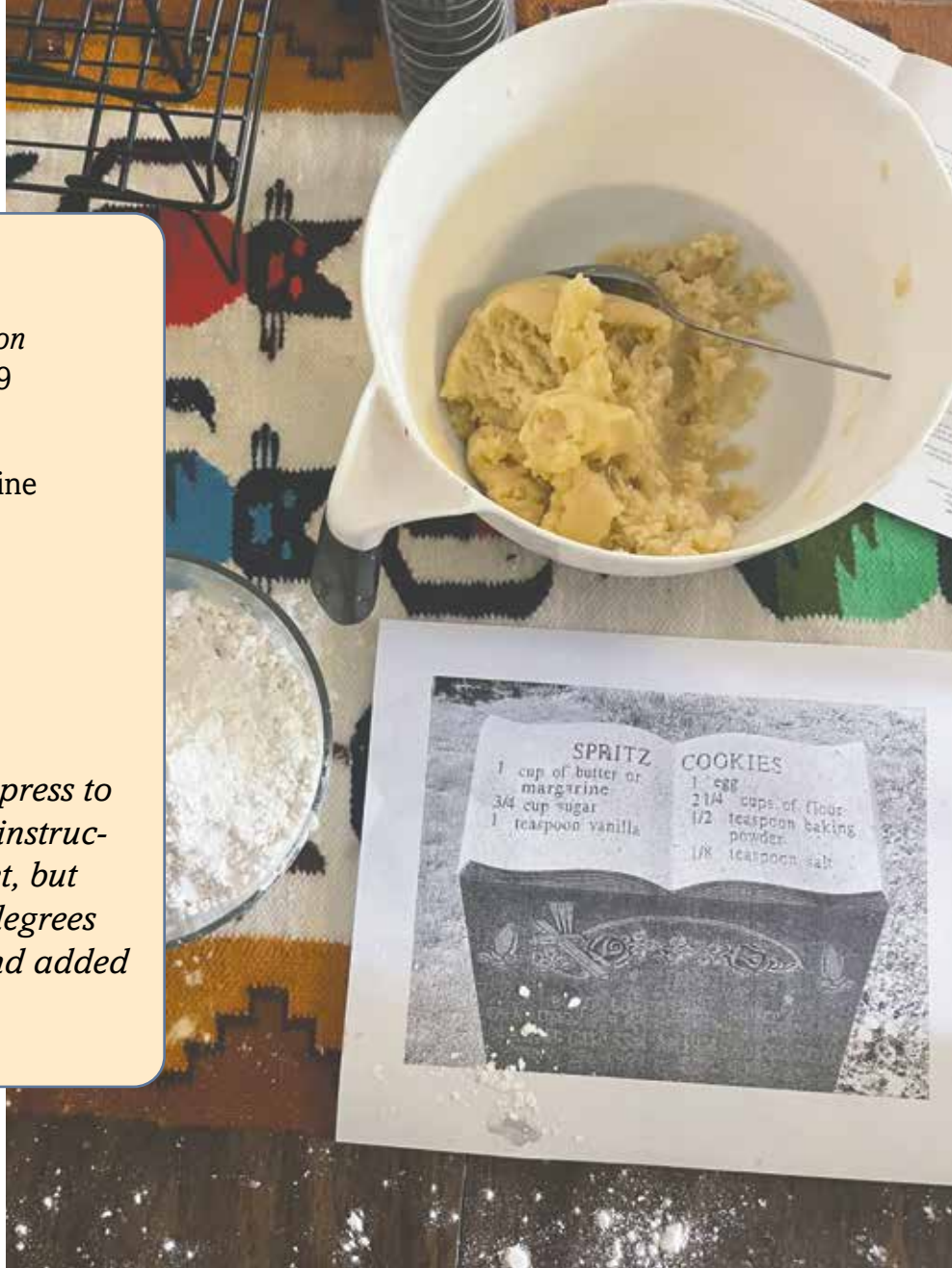
1 egg

$2\frac{1}{4}$ cups flour

$\frac{1}{2}$ tsp. baking powder

$\frac{1}{8}$ tsp. salt

Grant used a spritz cookie press to make the cookies. The full instructions remain a family secret, but Grant baked them at 400 degrees for five to seven minutes and added sprinkles.



Pretty girls bake graves

ROSIE GRANT ONCE flew from Louisiana to Portland, ME, to make Marian Montfort's recipe for apricot ice cream. "Hers is homemade, but it was hard to transport a frozen ice cream maker through TSA, so I decided to get vanilla bean ice cream instead," says Grant. She mixed the store-bought ice cream with dried apricots, apricot preserves, and the nut mix as specified in Ms. Montfort's recipe. Then she drove the icy concoction to the middle of nowhere in Maine, two hours north of Portland, to share it with Ms. Montfort, who passed away in 2007 and is buried in a remote cemetery. "I went this past summer," she says. "Maine was having an unusually high number of rainstorms so I was getting flood alerts. The ice cream was melting in the car. I had to wander through mud to get

to her gravestone." But when Grant sat next to Ms. Montfort's tombstone, on which her recipe was prominently displayed, eating the melted ice cream, she felt immense gratitude to this woman she'd never met.

What began as a social media experiment for a graduate school class has turned into an epic cooking adventure for Grant, 34. While pursuing a master's degree in library and information science at the University of Maryland, with the intention of becoming an archivist, she was tasked with starting a new social media account and posting to it every day for three months. She chose TikTok. At the same time, Grant was required to do an archives internship—in the middle of the pandemic. "Of all places, cemeteries were still offering internships because they were alive and well and busier than usual during



The final resting place of Kay Andrews

the pandemic,” says Grant. Grant selected the archives of the Congressional Cemetery in Washington, D.C., for her 2021 summer internship. The three-centuries-old historic burial site houses more than 600,000 graves over 61 square miles. Her social media professor suggested Grant focus her TikToks on what she was learning at the famously old grave sites.

As Grant became part of the #GraveTok and #CemeteryTok niche with her TikTok account (@ghostlyarchive), she discovered a plethora of information about the death industry. “I started posting about interesting ways people have been memorialized and buried. That was when I first heard [from other TikTokers] about the grave of Naomi Odessa Miller-Dawson.” Miller-Dawson, who died in 2009 and is buried in Brooklyn, NY, has a gravestone that looks like an open cookbook and lists the ingredients for spritz cookies. Grant decided to bake Miller-Dawson’s buttery treats. “I tried it and put it on TikTok and my universe exploded,” she says. “People wrote in the comments, saying, ‘My grandmother makes spritz cookies!’ Or shared how you need to use a cookie press to make them correctly.” Learning about Miller-Dawson led Grant to discover more gravestones of mostly women who had also left behind

Kay's Fudge

By Kay Andrews

Aug. 30, 1922 – Dec. 17, 2019

Logan, UT

2 sq. chocolate
 2 Tbsp. butter
 Melt on low heat
 Stir in 1 cup milk
 Bring to boil
 3 cups sugar
 1 tsp. vanilla
 Pinch of salt

Cook to softball stage.
 Pour on marble slab.
 Cool & beat & eat.

Grant suggests using unsweetened Baker's chocolate to make this.

cherished recipes. Her initial internet search led her to 10 tombstones. Followers amplified Grant’s project on TikTok and people reached out with leads. A tweet by Stephen King featured a grave with a peanut butter cookie recipe and fans forwarded the image to Grant. When someone sends her a name or photo, she looks them up on findagrave.com. “Sometimes a grave has a geolocation,” she says. “If not, I look up the cemetery and spend time there wandering around until I find them.” The best-case scenario is when families send her photos so she can pull up the metadata on that photo and geolocate the grave.

Leaving recipes on gravestones appears to be a relatively new phenomenon—the oldest Grant has found so far is from 1994. “The recipes are definitely part of a larger trend of gravestones and how we choose to be memorialized,” she says. “In the olden days, many people didn’t have the resources for a marker, but if you did, your memorial would have a religious symbol or the death dates. Nowadays, anything that’s important to a person could show up on a gravestone,” explains Grant. She recalls seeing

everything from movie quotes and lines from favorite books to carved renderings of people's pets. "Dying in the U.S. is so expensive. You have a limited amount of space, so I've seen people just put the ingredients on it." She mentions Yankele Topor, a man buried in Israel who only left behind the ingredients to his yeast cake. His wife said, "If you know how to cook, you'll know what to do with it."

An archivist-turned-amateur baker, Grant now works at UCLA. But when she can, she likes to visit some of the graves of recipe creators. She'll make the recipe, then sit down at the person's marker and take a bite, reading their name aloud and thinking about them. "There's an old tradition of bringing food to a cemetery to remember someone," says Grant. "After making their recipes at home, I wanted to honor them as best as I could by bringing their dish to their grave. I don't know if I'll be able to do this for every grave-stone since everyone is so spread out, but if I'm in the state, it seems worth trying to visit them."

At first, the visitations were fairly simple excursions, like visiting Miller-Dawson's grave in Brooklyn, where Grant has family. But some have turned more adventurous. She baked Christine Hammill's carrot cake (dubbed "A Good Carrot Cake"), topped with her vanilla cream cheese frosting, and took it 600 miles from Los Angeles to northern California. The cake arrived intact and tasted delicious. It's uncertain when Christine died, since she and her husband, Richard, are side by side with only their birthdates listed. But their engraved tombstones give a peek into their cheeky relationship. Richard's stone reads, "Oops, I should have listened to my wife." To which Christine's responds, "Yeah, look where we ended up."

Most of the recipes Grant has found are desserts, created by women, but she did whip up a cheese dip (comprised of spreadable cheddar cheese, mayonnaise, and bacon bits) left behind by Debra Ann Nelson, who died in 2021. Grant has chatted with several of the families of the women whose recipes she's found, and she's discovered that the deceased were the heads of their respective households. "They hosted the holidays. They loved sharing and connecting with people over food," Grant explains. She shares a theory of why these home chefs were predominantly women. "I follow a University of Maryland grad student on Instagram. She said patriarchy celebrates big external things like jobs and awards, and matriarchy celebrates the work behind community building."

"For a lot of these women, their main connection to others was through food," says Grant. She cites a chicken noodle soup from a woman named Valerie Volpe, who passed away in 2016. "Her son said food was her language. If she wanted to apologize to you, she would cook for you." Another woman, Annabell Gunderson, buried in 2007 in Willits, CA, offered her snickerdoodle recipe, which makes a batch of 100. "She made these cookies to share with people. It was such a part of her lived experience."

O'Neal's Peach Cobbler

By O'Neal Bogan Watson

Sept. 24, 1914 – July 1, 2005

Castor, LA

1 cup flour
2 tsp. baking powder
 $\frac{2}{3}$ cup sugar
 $\frac{1}{2}$ cup butter
 $\frac{1}{4}$ tsp. salt
Mix ingredients
Add $\frac{3}{4}$ cup milk

Put fruit into pan.

Pour on topping.

Bake at 350 degrees until done.

Grant used about four cut-up peaches to make this and baked it for an hour.



O'Neal Bogan Watson rests in peach





Rosie Grant in the Congressional Cemetery

So far, Grant has baked and cooked 25 (and counting) recipes. She's made everything from guava cobbler to chocolate mint brownies. She even cooked with Miller-Dawson's family. "Her son and granddaughter talked me through the process of making her spritz cookies. They told me she was the first generation of her family to leave Barbados and live in America," says Grant. Miller-Dawson's spritz cookies were popular with friends and coworkers, who begged for the recipe. But she refused. It was her son's idea to put the cookie recipe on her grave. "Now her great-grandson is the resident baker of the family. They still have her cookie press and the actual recipe in a plastic bag that they pull out every year. She still has such a presence in their lives."

Grant's view of dying has changed since she started her project, from something she feared to seeing the beauty in what the dead leave behind. She describes traveling to Castor, LA, a small town north of New Orleans, to make the peach cobbler recipe left behind by O'Neal Bogan "Peony" Watson, who died in 2005. Grant purchased fresh Louisiana peaches, mixed together the topping, baked it, then drove for four hours from New Orleans. "It was a pretty typical hot Louisiana summer day," she recalls. Surrounded by fluttering dragonflies and the whir of people mowing their lawns, Grant found Watson's grave. "I saw all of these rows of people with her [maiden]

last name. I thought, *Oh my gosh, you're amongst your family. This is so cool.* Her grave was extremely well adorned and decorated and cared for. I felt like, even in death, she is surrounded by loved ones."

Grant urges anyone with a cherished family recipe to document the food memories now. "I can't tell you the number of times I get messages like, 'I wish I had my dad write down his barbecue recipe and had cooked it with him before he died.'" When asked what recipe she would leave for others to enjoy, she says, "I think I'd do a clam linguini. I do my own take on a *New York Times* recipe with white wine. It's very yummy, so that's probably what I'd put on my gravestone."

Surprisingly, one of the tombstone recipes Grant found was left by someone who is still alive, offering Grant a unique opportunity to discover from the source why someone would choose to do this. When Peggy Neal's husband died in 2019, she decided to put their gravestones side by side in an Arkansas cemetery, and she included her sugar cookie recipe on hers. "Peggy told me, 'This is something I would send my kids off to school with. My kids' friends' parents would ask for the recipe. Teachers asked for it,'" Grant says. "When it came time for putting inscriptions on her husband's grave, she asked herself, 'What am I very proud of? I'm really proud of these cookies.'" **B**