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PHOTOS BY PAUL GREENBERG/GLOBE STAFF

Ann Cortissoz's caramels (above) are linked to her late grandfather, a Colombian who made candy in El Salvador using recipes from a 1924 cookbook (below) written by a New Englander.

Sweet story spans cultures, eras

By Ann Cortissoz
GLOBE STAFF

My grandfather, Gilberto Cortissoz, bought a candy factory in El Salvador in the mid-1920s. The factory had become his dream when he lived in Colombia, and the dream inspired him to move to New York to earn the money. At his factory, Gilberto made taffy, gumdrops, and butterscotch, among other sweets.

When I was a girl and my dad ate a butterscotch, he would always say, "This reminds me of the candy my father used to make." Then he'd tell me the story.



OH SO SWEET
Call for a recipe from Gilberto Cortissoz's favorite candy book, go to boston.com/tae/food.

Gilberto was born and raised in Bucaramanga, which is in the middle of the South American country. He became obsessed with owning a candy factory in San Salvador, 1,200 miles from where he lived. How he heard about the factory and why he wanted to make candy — having had no experience at the craft — was never clear. He had a mission, but no cash. So he moved his family, which included my grandmother Lais, my father, and another son, on a banana boat from Bucaramanga to New York. He drove a cab in the city for a couple of years to make money to buy the factory. Then he packed the family onto another banana boat, headed for San Salvador.

The story had always struck me as decidedly cinematic — think "Fitzcarraldo" or "The Mosquito Coast" with candy — and vaguely surreal. My dad was about 7 when they arrived at the factory, so his stories were long on sense memory and short on facts. Mostly he remembered how he and his brother ran around the factory floor, "testing" the different candies.

My grandfather died only a couple of years after he bought the factory, so I never met him, and I had little sense of what kind of person he was.

That is, until I found his book. When my father died a few years ago, I was going through his things and found something I had never seen before. "The Candy Cook Book" was the recipe book Gilberto used at the factory. The book's title page says it was written by Alice Bradley, principal of Miss Farmer's School of Cookery, copyright 1924. Fannie Farmer's school was in Boston, so my Colombian grandfather was making candy in El Salvador using a classic New England book.

Flipping through the pages, I noticed that there were careful, precise notes in pencil in the margins of some of the recipes, conversions from Fahrenheit to Celsius and amendments to the ingredients. The notes were in English — I never knew my grandfather could read English, let alone write in it. The handwriting reminded me of my dad's.

It seemed logical to head for the kitchen using my grandfather's old manual. I decided to try a recipe for caramels, which didn't require a candy thermometer. I went to an accomplished home baker for advice and she said to steer clear of the complicated candies my grandfather made.

As I spent time with the old book, flipping back repeatedly to the pages on which my grandfather had written, I decided that he was careful and thoughtful. He could obviously keep a lot of information in his head, because the book offered little instruction, and his notes were reminders of what he had made and how the recipe had worked. As I studied the book, I thought that he must have been very much like my father: a quiet, intelligent man who believed you could teach yourself anything, even candy making, from a book.

The caramels were easy and turned out beautifully. I intend to make them often, so they become something that everyone associates with me. I like the idea that every time I eat a caramel, I'll be reminded of what my father used to say when he tasted a butterscotch. Now I have something to add to the story.

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