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## Interview: Kathy Wielech Patterson (co-author, "Maryland's Chesapeake")

interviews

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Maryland having a bit of an upswing of interest in reflection on our local cuisine. If my cookbook collection is any indication, this tends to come in waves. At the turn of the 20th century, there was a general sentiment that Maryland food was high quality, and cookbooks banked on this reputation. Then came the wave of gas company and community cookbooks full of recipes that attempted to update the classics for modern cooking technology and budgets. The last wave was in the 90s, when, for whatever reason, an increased interest in 'crab culture' brought on a new series of Maryland seafood cookbooks.

This time around, people are turning a critical eye towards their own consumption and our relationship with the environment, and some of the human cost of harvesting and preparing the literal and figurative fruits of the region.

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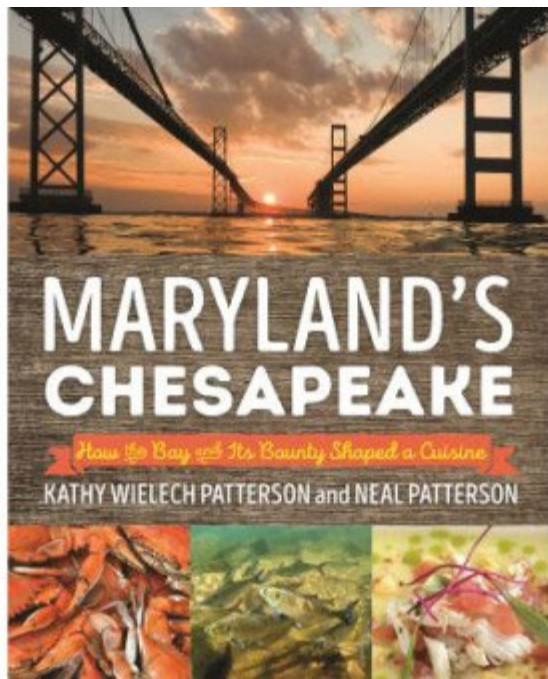
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When I saw this new book, "[Maryland's Chesapeake: How the Bay and Its Bounty Shaped a Cuisine](#)" by Kathy Wielech Patterson and Neal Patterson, I knew I had to get a copy but I wasn't sure what to expect. More opinions on how to fry a soft-shell? Oyster wars recap? That same recipe for Smith Island cake?

The Pattersons have built a reputation on documenting highlights of Baltimore's dining scene in local media, on [their blog](#) and in a number of books. "[Baltimore Chef's Table](#)" is in itself a historical document, the kind of book that will preserve a moment in time for another generation of curious cooks. "[Food Lovers' Guide to Baltimore](#)" is more of a compendium of information on restaurants, shops, and farmers' markets, with some recipes thrown in for good measure.

In addition to enthusiasm about the growing number of dining options around the city, they also share an appreciation for the history and also the present and future systems that keep Baltimore's culinary scene going. And that is what "Maryland's Chesapeake" is about.

The [Dundalk Eagle](#) describes "Maryland's Chesapeake" as "part history, part science book and part cookbook." The book begins with a rough history for the uninitiated, but continues on with background about things like our tragic past of tobacco-farming and slavery, the decline and fall of Maryland's strawberry industry, and the invasion of the Snakehead fish. Some of Jay Fleming's beautiful photography is scattered throughout for good measure.



*Jay Fleming*

And there are of course recipes – not just for Smith Island Cake and pan-fried chicken but also some adventurous updates. Baltimore pastry chef Bettina Perry creates a new spin on the state cake; soft crab is given a chili-lime butter treatment care of Chef Mike Random of the B & O Brasserie.

"Maryland's Chesapeake" may not be quite a cookbook, but it is an ideal book for those of us who read them.

**How did you go about selecting which chefs to feature – and get them to share their recipes?**

Our second book, Baltimore Chef's Table, included recipes from 50+ local chefs, so we had made a lot of friends prior to starting Maryland's Chesapeake and knew who would be the best collaborators. As soon as we knew we were going to write this book, I emailed Chad Wells and told him about it. I knew he'd be the best person to talk to about invasive species and fishing in general. It also helped that he was at Alewife at the time, located just two blocks from where I work at UMB, so I could pop down there at lunchtime and chat with him in person. Annmarie Langton from Gypsy Queen was also pulled into the project pretty early, as was Winston Blick from Clementine. Other chefs became involved when we realized they cooked amazing dishes using the requisite ingredients. For example, after we tasted certain of Zack Mills' dishes at Wit & Wisdom, we knew we had to have them. And he's such a great guy, he even let us use his photos. We needed a pastry chef to work on a modernized Smith Island cake and Bettina Perry was so willing and did an amazing job. Then there's Scott Hines, who recently became the Executive Chef at B&O American Brasserie (such a well-deserved promotion and he's doing

some amazing stuff there). I needed four more recipes for various things and hoped he could give me one or two. He tackled them all. We're pretty happy with the recipes in the book.



*Smoked Oysters with Old Bay Seasoning Butter, Chef Zack Mills (Wit & Wisdom)*

**As someone who is an experienced cook who also is out on the dining scene frequently, can you talk about what the appeal is to go out when you can cook great meals at home (besides no dishes!)**

No dishes is definitely a perk to going out to eat! But even though Neal and I are both pretty good cooks, and I'm always fiddling with new recipe ideas, sometimes it's just nice not to have to think about it. Everybody likes to have someone else take care of them, even if it's just for a couple of hours. And Baltimore's restaurant scene has grown by leaps and bounds recently. A dozen years ago I wouldn't have imagined places like Ekiben and R House and the re-imagined Belvedere Square Market with its smoked fish and ramen joints. Baltimore has always been a couple of years behind when it comes to food trends, but now it seems we've caught up. And so much of it is stuff we can't make at home as easily, like good pizza or sushi or arepas. I mean, we *could* make them, but someone else is going to do those so much better, so why even try?

**One of the most interesting discoveries for me was the **Stream ReLeaf project** for reforesting the banks of Chesapeake tributaries with Black Walnut trees- how did you come across that?**

Google! Sometimes doing research on one topic leads down a rabbit hole of amazing discoveries. We found out a lot of information that way. The Internet is a great resource.

**Another strong message in the book is the incorporation of invasive species into our food culture – things like snakehead fish. Was that an aspect of Maryland food you were already pretty familiar with or**

**did you learn about it as a part of book research?**

As I mentioned before, we were already friends with Chad Wells, who is a sworn enemy of invasive species, particularly snakehead and blue catfish. He had orchestrated an all-snakehead dinner at Alewife a few years ago and though Neal and I didn't attend, we had heard all about it. He suggested we attend the Potomac Snakehead Tournament last year, which gave us a closer look at the uglies. It was astonishing how many pounds were caught in a relatively small stretch of the river and really drove home the fact that there were more and more of them out there, constantly multiplying. If we don't eat them into local extinction, our native species don't stand much of a chance.

**Was there anything that \*you\* learned that was surprising to you?**

Crab aquaculture was the big surprise for us. We knew about farmed fish and oysters, which seemed almost easy. But crabs are travelers, moving up and down the vast length of the Bay to live and spawn. The way Dr Zohar and his team worked out how to fool the crabs into thinking they were traveling was pretty damn ingenious.





*Jay Fleming*

**Your research included everything from Miss M.L. Tyson to John Shields – do you have a personal favorite Maryland cookbook?**

Personally, I don't have any favorite cookbooks. We own tons of them, but I mostly use them for inspiration. I read them from cover to cover, absorbing ideas and techniques, and then I cook. Rarely do I follow a recipe to the letter, and then only because it's science-y, like baking. Once I understand how to make something, I can make it without using a

reference, and I think this is the way most people used to cook. If you look at some of those old cookbooks, there are recipes that have a list of ingredients but the method is very vague. Home cooks then already knew what to do, because they cooked every day from scratch. Now we have convenience food and microwaves and so many restaurants and we've lost (or never developed) a cooking "muscle memory." So while I can go into the kitchen and rustle up a crab soup off the top of my head, for this book we needed some classic tried-and-true recipes. And like everything else in the book, that required research, which required acquiring cookbooks. And when one cookbook didn't seem definitive enough, we had to buy another, and another.

**Do you have a favorite place to get Maryland tomatoes?**

My favorite place for Maryland tomatoes is our backyard. We have been growing 6-8 varieties of heirloom tomatoes for the past few years. It's great to walk outside and pick what we need. We live just outside the city, and apart from the various farmers' markets, there's no real source for good tomatoes in the area. We used to be able to get decent ones from the Arabbers carts when I lived in Fells Point in the 70s, but they probably get theirs from Sysco now.

**What are the main 'takeaways' that you hope that the book adds to the ongoing (beginningless, endless) Chesapeake food conversation?**

I would hope that readers would understand that we're all in this together. That the problems the Bay is facing aren't just abstractions, and that we can't just go on blithely eating crabs forever and not worry about it. Seemingly small things, like not putting chemicals on their lawns and picking up after their dogs, are helpful. Making donations to organizations like the Chesapeake Bay Foundation and the Oyster Recovery Partnership so they can further their great work is also a valuable way to participate in helping the Bay recover.

**"Maryland's Chesapeake: How the Bay and Its Bounty Shaped a Cuisine"**  
at the Ivy Bookshop



*Bacon & Oyster Pie recipe from Chef Adam Snyder (recipe coming later this week...)*

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[String Bean Casserole with Black Walnuts](#)

[Bacon Oyster Pie](#)   
from "Maryland's Chesapeake"

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Text by Kara Mae Harris except where noted. Recipes come from historic sources and no claims are made regarding their safety.

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