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In words and food, Maya Angelou reflects on holidays

(AP) -- For Maya Angelou, the holidays bring family and friends to the table to eat, to laugh, and to one-up each other.

"This is a time when people get to 'show out,' as my grandmother used to say," says Angelou, poet, memoirist and civil rights icon. "Moe is going to try to out cook Joe. It becomes amusing and delightful."

Angelou, whose second cookbook, "Great Food, All Day Long" (Random House, 2010), features holiday-worthy dishes such as crown roast and prime rib, helped a generation understand why caged birds sing. But what about how to make perfect veal chops?

"I'm a cook, a serious cook," she says. "I plan meals not only for their nutritional value but for their beauty. I plan them around who's going to eat them and when. It's ceremonial, for jubilation or commiserating over something."

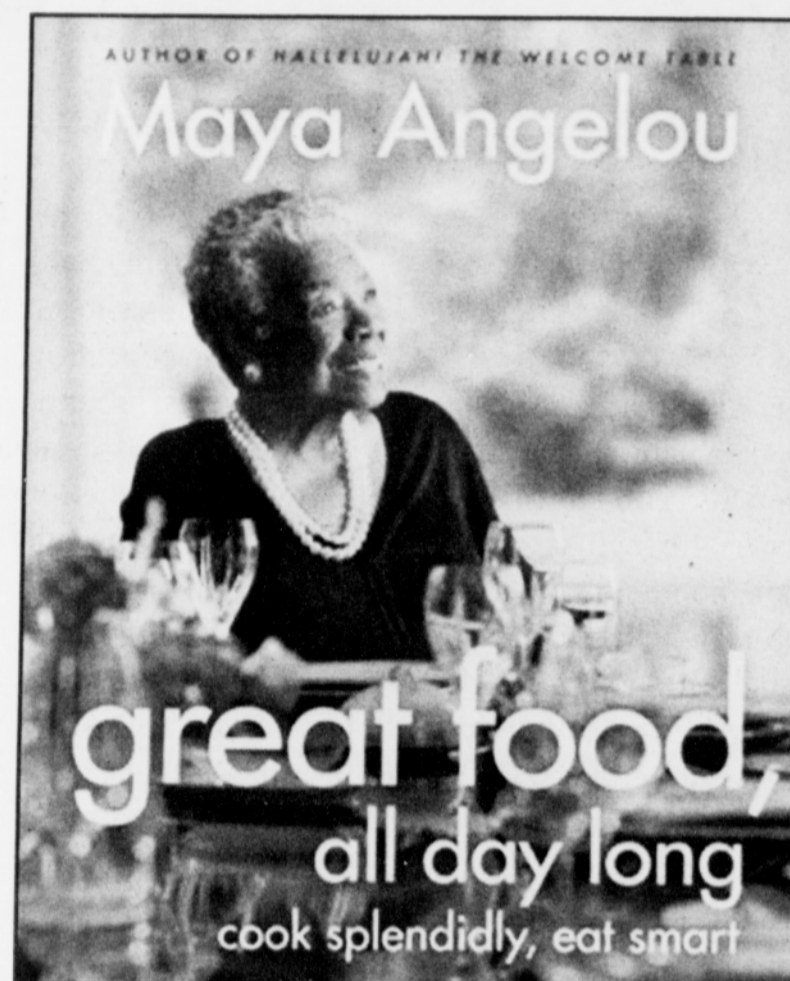
Which makes Angelou's cooking very much like her writing. The 82-year-old Pulitzer winner approaches the kitchen with the same respect for ingredients that she gives her words.

"You have to examine and be familiar with every element," she says. "So you should know a red pepper, what it will do in a skillet with a tablespoon of olive oil, how it will look. How if you give more heat what will happen to it. You know the materials well."

Despite a fractured childhood shuttling between the families of her estranged parents, Angelou learned to cook much the way everyone wishes — at her grandmother's knee.

"She would say 'Now sit down and watch me.'" Angelou says. "I loved her so much that I followed her around. People would say, 'You got your shadow with you again.' I watched her carefully."

When Angelou lived with her mother as a teenager, she watched again, learning shortcuts like using a gas stove and making shortcake with store-bought cake, luxuries her grand-



mother in rural Arkansas didn't have.

"My grandmother didn't know anything about that," says Angelou, who was usually put in charge of the scrubbing and chopping of vegetables. "I learned both techniques."

Cooking can be a gateway to creativity of all kinds, Angelou says, if you pay careful attention to the craft. "I ask folks to read poetry, to read it aloud, so they can hear the music, the melody of it," she says. "I would encourage a person who wants to cook to buy cookbooks."

Angelou estimates her own cookbook collection at somewhere around 300 volumes.

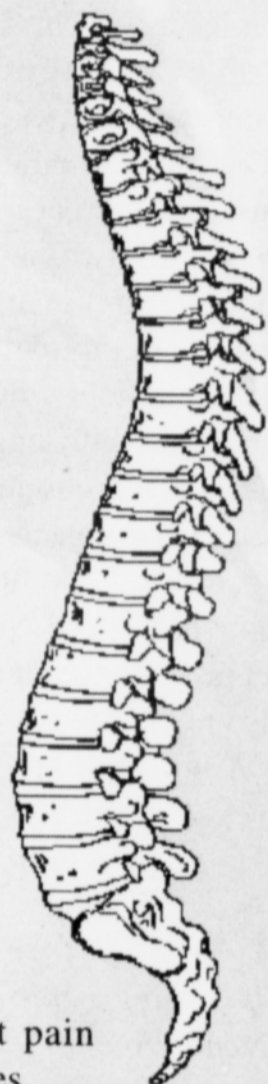
And at this time of year, she says, cooking for others takes on a deeper meaning. "When a person cooks for me, I like to think of the cooking itself as a gift," she

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