Hail to the Chef

By Walter Scheib

GREAT FALLS, Va.

HE long association between first ladies — or those aspiring to the role — and recipes was thrust into the headlines recently when it was discovered that recipes attributed to Cindy McCain on her husband's campaign Web site were lifted, verbatim, from the Food Network. (A campaign spokesman attributed this seeming act of plagiarism to an intern.)

I ought to be the last person to question this preoccupation with first families' dining habits, since it helped propel me to a certain kind of prominence when Hillary Clinton hired me to be White House chef in 1994. But I confess that I have often wondered why we are fascinated not just with what our presi-

Walter Scheib is the author of "White House Chef: Eleven Years, Two Presidents, One Kitchen." dents and their families eat, but what they cook.

Let's make one thing clear: first families don't get to the White House because of their cooking. True, in one episode of the TV show "The West Wing," there's a federal government shutdown, the chefs are not at work and the first lady cooks dinner. But that's, well, television.

With the exception of Chelsea Clinton, whom I taught to cook before she left for college, I rarely if ever saw the first families I served use the White House kitchen. And from what other White House have chefs told me, I'm not alone.

The truth of the matter is that while presidents' families will occasionally provide the chef with a family recipe or one clipped from a magazine or borrowed from a Web site, for the most part, they have much more on their minds than what to put on the table every night.

And while we're on the subject, isn't the whole thing a tad sexist? I don't believe that anyone has asked Bill Clinton

what he'll be looking for in a chef should his wife become president or what he'll serve at his first state dinner. (As his family's former chef, I can't resist affectionately suggesting that this is probably for the best, given his predilection for comfort food.) And, as far as I know,

Stop pretending that politicians and their families bake cookies.

no one has asked him for a cookie recipe.

As a chef, I understand how food can be a powerful political symbol. (Remember when George H. W. Bush used to make a point of saying he loved pork rinds?) But if there's one thing I learned in the White House it's that the dining habits of our first families aren't all that revealing. After the Clintons left the White House, I stayed on for the first four years of the Bush administration and was surprised to see how similar were Mrs. Clinton's and Laura Bush's tastes: though very different women, they both liked Southwestern cuisine and spicy foods and ate relatively healthfully. Just about the only thing that's changed in the menu is Mrs. Bush's insistence on organic products — much to her husband's surprise.

It's been said over and over that this is a sea-change campaign — a black man or a woman could be our next president. So in the spirit of this change, let's make another world-changing vow: let's stop pretending our politicians and their families all own well-thumbed copies of "The Fannie Farmer Cookbook," and let's stop, once and for all, asking them for favorite family recipes.

When it comes to seeking clues about what lies in the hearts and minds of the candidates, there are better places to look than their palates — and their recipes. \Box