

# **A SKILLET, A SPATULA, AND A DREAM**

**A writer's life . . . with recipes**

**by Barbara Bretton**

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## **TABLE OF CONTENTS**

### **INTRODUCTION**

### **RETRO FAMILY FAVORITES**

CROCK POT: SPANISH CHICKEN

CROCK POT: BEEF BURGUNDY

DADDY'S FIESTA MEAT LOAF

MOM'S PORK CHOPS AND POTATOES

GRANDMA'S TURKEY STUFFING

### **SMALL BITES**

WATERCRESS TEA SANDWICHES

BRUSCHETTA

CHICKEN SALAD TEA SANDWICHES

### **MAKE AT HOME TAKE-OUT FAVORITES**

KUNG PAO CHICKEN

SHREDDED BEEF IN SPICY SAUCE

PEKING PARK SZECHUAN SHRIMP

LAKE TUNG TING SHRIMP

### **MULTICULTURAL KITCHEN**

CATHY THACKER'S FAJITAS

SPANAKOPITA

PASTA PUTTANESCA

ALMOST PERFECT CHICKEN PAD THAI

### **SALADS**

MILLIE'S FAMOUS COLE SLAW

HOT AND SPICY PEPPER SALAD

[BANZAI SALAD WITH GINGER DRESSING](#)

[GREEK SALAD A LA OLD NEIGHBORHOOD](#)

[STAYING HOME TONIGHT BROCCOLI SALAD](#)

[PARROT SALAD](#)

[COLD SHRIMP WITH BASIL MAYONNAISE](#)

## **SOUPS**

[SUPERWOMAN SYNDROME PASTA FAZOO](#)

[DEADLINE SOUP](#)

[MUSHROOM BARLEY SOUP](#)

[SNOWY DAY CREAM OF CELERY SOUP](#)

[CAPE MAY CLAM CHOWDER](#)

[KANSAS CITY STEAK SOUP, NEW JERSEY STYLE](#)

[TEX AMISH CHICKEN CORN CHOWDER](#)

[A.C. ZUPPA A LA WISEGUY](#)

## **VEGGIE FARE**

[PORTOBELLO BURGERS](#)

[TONI TENNILLE'S MUSKRAT CASSEROLE](#)

## **SWEET STUFF**

[CHRISTMAS BROWNIES](#)

[HOT FUDGE SAUCE](#)

[BLUEBERRY MUFFINS](#)

[WONDERFUL WHEATIES CAKE AKA VELVET CRUMB CAKE](#)

[GREAT MOLASSES SPICE COOKIES \(WITH ONE REALLY WEIRD INGREDIENT\)](#)

[MY MOTHER'S RICE PUDDING](#)

[ROSE'S FAMOUS SOUR CREAM COFFEE CAKE](#)

## **ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

## INTRODUCTION

If you don't count lunches or the year my husband was overseas or the times we picked up a bite at the diner or called out for pizza or the times I cooked for a multitude instead of just for two or the dozens of eggplant parmigiana dinners I made for us before we got married, then it's safe to say I've cooked somewhere in the vicinity of 25,128 meals in my forty-plus years of wedded bliss.

Think about that for a minute. Twenty-five thousand times I stared blankly into the glare of the refrigerator's bulb and wondered what on earth I was going to do with an egg and a piece of broccoli that could reasonably be called a meal. Twenty-five thousand times I stepped up to the stove with nothing but a skillet, a spatula, and a dream.

In fact, it's a lot like the way I feel when I sit down at the computer to start a new book. Trust me, an empty plate can inspire the same fear in a writer's soul as an empty page.

I'm a work-at-home writer who loves to cook but I can do without the fuss that surrounds it. I don't want to clean the stove or scrub out the sink or slice those little Xs in the bottoms of a bucket of Brussels sprouts. I don't want to plunge my writer's hands into a writhing mass of ground beef when I'm making meatballs. And don't ask me to reach inside a dead turkey because I'll just have to draw a line in the stuffing. I love big bold flavors, one-pot meals, delicious salads, chill-chasing soups, and home-baked goodies but my favorite recipes are the ones that come with stories attached.

I don't trust those big antiseptic kitchens with the lighting straight out of E.R. and the counter tops that can pass for gurneys and the medicinal pantry shelves. How can anything delicious spring from such a sterile environment? Oh, I know they say that big country kitchens with lots of dark wood cabinets and stone hearths and copper molds nailed to the walls are passe but I don't much care. These are the kitchens with stories to tell, the kinds of stories I want to hear.

The perfect kitchen doesn't have to be enormous or state-of-the-art. It only has to be big enough to hold your family's heart and soul, a fact I've known since I was a little girl, cooking next to my mother in a small apartment kitchen that somehow managed to contain everything that was important to me.

I learned to cook in my mother's kitchen. I learned to read and write and knit there too. If I close my eyes I can still see the overstuffed red chair in the corner near the window, squished between the table and the radiator, piled high with yarn and books and love.

Years later I wrote my first three books at my own kitchen table. When it was time to make dinner, I would push my Royal portable typewriter aside and start cooking.

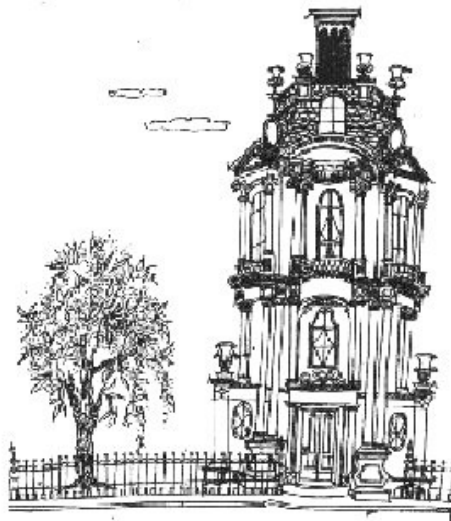
And I was standing in that same kitchen in February 1982 when I received The Call that changed my life, the call from an editor who wanted to buy my book.

I'm not a fancy cook. Not really. Sometimes I pull out all the stops and take down the china and the crystal and the silverware (on Thanksgiving, for instance) and put on a show. Mostly, though, I'm a creative and erratic cook whose best work is done in a huge pot or a giant salad bowl. My happiest meals are enjoyed curled up in the corner of the sofa with a big bowl of something spicy and delicious on my lap and my husband sprawled in the opposite corner with his own

bowl of something great. One-pot cooking. One-bowl eating. Fabulous soups. Stews. Pastas. Steaming oatmeal with raisins or dried cranberries. Orzo with butter and Parmesan and crushed red pepper flakes. In the summer, Caesars and gazpacho and Greek salads piled high with feta and thinly sliced red onion.

See what I mean?

I'm Barbara Bretton and I'm glad you found me. Let's cook.



[BACK TO TOP](#)

## RETRO FAVORITES

Do you remember fondue parties? They were to the 1970s what Mexican food is to the new Millennium. If I had a nickel for every fondue party we held back in the old house, I'd--well, I'd definitely have a bigger balance in my checking account.

We were the only couple with a house so everyone trekked to our place on the weekends for fondue. I mean, it was a Capital Letter Event. Roy and I supplied the big dining room table and the wine and beer and soda, the fondue pot, and at least a dozen sauces and dessert. Danielle and Carlos brought the chicken. Tanya and Jay brought the beef while Norma and Wayne schlepped two Bloomie's bags filled with veggies on the Long Island Railroad from Manhattan to North Babylon.

Imagine a huge oval table set up in the dining room. (Okay, so maybe the dining room was part of the living room. No need to get picky.) The fondue pot had the place of honor in the center of the table, its electrical cord snaking over the edge and out of sight. It makes me queasy to think about it now but that pot was filled with bubbling hot oil that we used to basically deep fry the meats and veggies. And what, you ask, did we do with our fried goodies once they were done? Well, we did exactly what you'd think we would do: we dipped each piece into the richest, most luscious sauces you could imagine. Mustard/cognac. Horseradish. Gloppy concoctions made with sour cream and snipped fresh herbs. Honey and teriyaki and shaved ginger and garlic. We didn't know from fat content and cholesterol back then and we didn't much care. We knew what we liked and what tasted good, but mostly we knew we were having fun.

The smell of hot Wesson oil hung like fog by the time the evening was over and we slept with the windows open even in the coldest of January nights but I am so glad we had those silly fondue dinners back in the day. Times change and people change along with them and sooner or later, all you have left are the wonderful memories. If I close my eyes, I can still see the pecan wood of the dining room chairs, the five-shades-of-gold needlepoint cushions I made for them, the cream and deep gold wallpaper, the stereo piled high with music to scarf fondue by.

But it wasn't all fondue. Sometimes we broke out our Crock Pots...

### CROCK POT SPANISH CHICKEN

#### *Ingredients*

Slow cooker

Maybe two pounds of boneless, skinless chicken breasts (that amount works well in our medium-sized slow cooker)

3 six-ounce cans of tomato paste

1 can or bottle of beer

A jar of green olives and their brine (how many olives depends on how much you like them; you do want about one cup of brine) (don't hesitate to bump up the volume with water if that's what your taste buds tell you to do)

Salt and pepper

Cayenne pepper

Garlic powder

### ***Method***

Add tomato paste, beer, olives, and brine to the slow cooker and mix to combine thoroughly. Rinse and pat dry your chicken breasts then sprinkle salt, pepper, cayenne (to taste), and garlic powder on each one, both sides. Place the chicken breasts in the slow cooker with the tomato paste mixture. Cook on low for six to eight hours depending on your slow cooker and the size of your chicken breasts. Serve over fideos or angel hair pasta.

[BACK TO TOP](#)

\*\*\*

## **CROCK POT BEEF BURGUNDY**

Cooking with red wine. It didn't get more sophisticated than that back in the early 1970s. I conjured up my inner Julia and turned away from Boone's Farm apple and the ubiquitous sangria and reached for the burgundy. Actually I had to reach for the burgundy because that was the difference between plain old beef stew and four-star Boeuf Bourguignon. You see, my husband doesn't do stew. He had a frightening encounter with beef stew as a kid and never quite recovered. But Beef Burgundy--well, that's another story.

### ***Ingredients***

6 slices bacon (no, this isn't a health food recipe)

3 lbs. chuck, cut into two-inch chunks (I prefer a lean round roast; the slow-cooking will tenderize it beautifully)

1 sliced carrot

1 sliced onion

3 tablespoons flour

1 pound mushrooms, sliced

Burgundy

1 can beef broth (or homemade beef stock if you're lucky enough to have some lying around)

1 can tomato paste

2 cloves garlic, minced

1 bay leaf

1 teaspoon crushed thyme

1/2 pound small white onions

### ***Method***

Cook bacon. Drain on paper towels and set aside. Add beef cubes and brown well. Do not burn. Put beef cubes in slow cooker. Brown sliced carrots and onions, season with salt and pepper. Stir in the flour. Cook for two or three minutes--again don't let it burn--to get the raw taste out of the flour. Add broth, tomato paste, garlic, bay leaf, bacon, and thyme then add mixture to slow cooker. Peel the white onions and add them to the slow cooker.

Cook on low for 8-10 hours. (High 4-5 hours.) Saute the mushrooms in 2 tablespoons butter then add them to the slow cooker with a healthy glug of the best Burgundy you can afford. Remember: if you can't drink it, don't cook with it.

Simmer in slow cooker for another 30-60 minutes. Serve with noodles or potatoes or whatever you like.

[BACK TO TOP](#)

\*\*\*

## **DADDY'S FIESTA MEAT LOAF**

Before my parents retired and moved here from New York City, I had never seen my father cook anything more than fried eggs and toast. What a shock it was to see him in the kitchen that first week, whipping up a meat loaf! Who knew that a budding Emeril Lagasse lurked behind his New York Mets sweatshirt?



This was the first thing he cooked and it was an unqualified success. The sauce is so good that I've used it on everything from chicken to fish to baked potatoes, all with spectacular results.

*Bon appetit!*

### ***Ingredients***

1/2 cup chopped onion  
1/2 cup chopped celery  
1/4 cup chopped green pepper  
2 tablespoons butter  
1 bottle Heinz Chili Sauce (12 oz)  
1 1/2 pounds lean ground beef  
1 cup soft bread crumbs  
1 egg, lightly beaten  
Salt and pepper, to taste

Saute onion, celery, and green pepper in butter until tender. Stir in chili sauce.

### ***Method***

Combine 1/2 cup of this mixture with the ground beef, bread crumbs, egg, salt and pepper. Form into a loaf in shallow baking pan.

Bake in 350 degree oven for one hour. Let stand five minutes before slicing. Serve remaining sauce over meat loaf.

[BACK TO TOP](#)

\*\*\*

## **MOM'S PORK CHOPS AND POTATOES**

### ***Ingredients***

4 pork chops

1 can Cream of Mushroom soup

1/2 cup sour cream

1/4 cup water

2 tablespoons chopped parsley

4 cups thinly sliced potatoes

Salt

Pepper

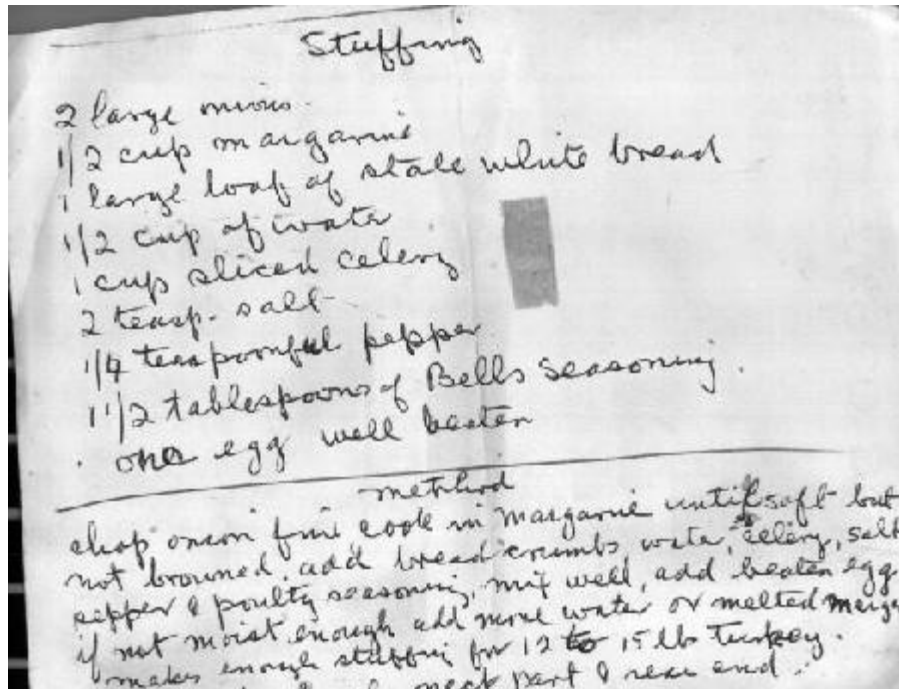
***Method***

Brown chops in skillet. Blend soup, sour cream, water, and parsley. In 2 quart casserole, alternate layers of potatoes, sprinkled with salt and pepper, and sauce. Top with chops. Cover. Bake at 375 for 1 hour. Makes four servings.

That's the basic bones recipe that my mother used as a jumping off point. She always added Tabasco, Worcestershire, a touch of dry mustard, and other goodies to this. Experiment!

[BACK TO TOP](#)

\*\*\*



## GRANDMA EL'S TURKEY STUFFING

My Grandma El (who died in 1989) has an alarming habit of reappearing in my life at Thanksgiving. Two years ago she appeared in the form of an audiotape made twenty years earlier. A tape that opened up avenues in my life and heart that I still haven't fully explored.

Anyway, I was on my hands and knees in the dining room, searching through the buffet for the china and glasses I needed to wash and dry for tomorrow and there she was. A tiny slip of weathered paper tucked behind the iced tea glasses S gave me for my birthday. They're very silly glasses, tall and skinny with parrots painted on the side. Bright red and green and yellow birds with big smiles on their beaks. It would have been easy to overlook Grandma but she fluttered out from behind those glasses.

Actually it was her stuffing recipe that did the fluttering. The simplest stuffing imaginable. (I can excuse the margarine. She believed in the holy trinity of margarine, lecithin, and dolomite.) Written in her own hand. The curves and angles of her letters are so familiar to me, so strangely dear now that she's gone and I can think of her without heat. She's long gone and so are her clothes and her books and the smell of her Tigress perfume but here she is before me, as real and immediate as she ever was in life.

All the photographs in the world couldn't bring her back to me the way this simple little recipe did. Her recipe is my stuffing recipe. Sure I've changed it over the years (recipes are starting points, not destinations) but the essence, the Grandma El-ness of it, remains.

### *Ingredients*

2 finely chopped onions

1/2 cup margarine (please use butter!)

1 large loaf of stale white bread

1/2 cup hot water

1 cup finely chopped celery

2 teaspoons salt

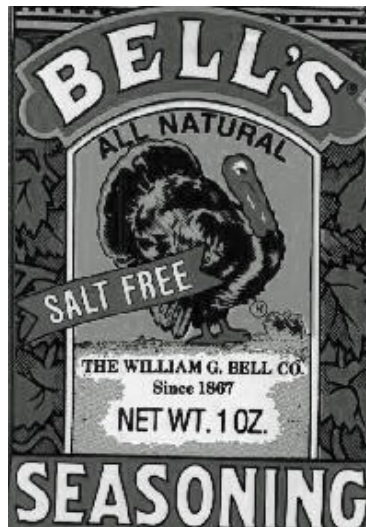
1/2 teaspoon pepper

1 1/2 tablespoons Bell's Seasoning (definitely the secret ingredient)

1 egg, well-beaten in a separate bowl

### ***Method***

Cook onions and celery in melted butter until soft but not browned. Add the remaining ingredients including the beaten egg. If not moist enough, add more water or melted butter. If too moist, add more bread crumbs. Make sure you use a fresh box of Bell's Seasoning. It's the secret to any stuffing you make.



[BACK TO TOP](#)

## SMALL BITES

### WATERCRESS TEA SANDWICHES

I suppose it's my English blood but I just can't help loving these tiny elegant morsels. They make me sit up straighter, mind my manners, and yearn for a silver tea service and a butler to go with it. You would think I learned my English ways from my English grandmother and her siblings but it was my Swedish-Chippewa mother who taught me everything I know. My mother was an Anglophile through and through and these recipes are all hers.

One of my favorite memories is of the day I invited my mother, our friend Millie, and her sister Dottie over for High Tea. I had been planning for years to do that but you know how it is. You're busy. You're overworked. You're full of excuses. Finally one day I committed myself to putting aside work and making an afternoon of it with those three delightful women. We had watercress sandwiches, dainty cucumber sandwiches, tea served from two of my favorite china tea pots, and a platter of homemade shortbread. We talked. We gossiped. We laughed. We made memories that I'll always treasure.

#### *Ingredients*

2 sticks unsalted butter softened

2 teaspoons heavy cream

1 teaspoons Dijon mustard

1 teaspoons lemon juice

Salt and pepper to taste

1 large bunch watercress, washed and trimmed

12 thin slices of your favorite bread

#### *Method*

Mix butter, cream, mustard, and lemon juice. Season with salt and pepper. Spread mixture over 6 slices of bread. Top with equal amounts watercress and remaining six slices of bread. Trim crusts and cut each sandwich diagonally from top two corners to bottom corners so each sandwich yields four triangles.

[BACK TO TOP](#)

\*\*\*

## **BRUSCHETTA**

I love pesto. I love bruschetta. Put them together and you have a quick easy snack that will put you in a Tuscan frame of mind.

### ***Ingredients***

1 loaf Italian or French bread (w or w/o seeds)

Pesto (the traditional basil/garlic kind)(store-bought is okay for this)

Tomatoes, seeded and chopped

Fresh mozzarella, chopped fine

### ***Method***

Cut the bread on the diagonal. Place slices on the grill or arrange them on a baking sheet and run them under the broiler until golden. (If you like, you can brush them with a tiny bit of olive oil before grilling them.)

Let cool slightly. Spread a thin layer of pesto on each slice. Sprinkle with chopped tomatoes. Top with Mozzarella. Heat in warm oven (maybe 350 degrees) for two minutes if you like. Or eat at room temperature.

Jug of wine and thou optional.

[BACK TO TOP](#)

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## **CHICKEN SALAD TEA SANDWICHES**

If you're looking for something a tad more substantial for your afternoon repast . . .

### ***Ingredients***

12 thin slices whole wheat bread

Unsweetened butter

1 cup minced cooked chicken breast

2 tablespoons finely chopped toasted almonds

2 tablespoons finely chopped green grapes, seedless

1 tablespoon heavy cream

1 tablespoon brandy (optional; I don't care for the contrast with the other more delicate ingredients)

Salt and pepper, to taste

### ***Method***

Butter bread sparingly. Mix chicken, almonds, grapes, cream, optional brandy, salt and pepper. Spread mixture on 6 bread slices and top with remaining 6 bread slices. Trim crusts and cut each full sandwich diagonally from two corners to bottom corners to each yields 4 triangles.

[BACK TO TOP](#)



Deadlines are definitely hazardous to your health. The closer I get to the end of a book, the more I crave take-out from Hunan Delight. I'm not sure I understand why General Tso's Chicken spurs my imagination but it does and I'm superstitious enough not to mess with something that works. One writer friend used to stock her fridge with buckets of KFC and enough Oreos to build a house when she went underground to finish a book. Another corners the market on Mallomars and tuna salad sandwiches. Yes, I know we should be balancing carbs and proteins, turning up our noses at bad fats and embracing the good but somehow my writer friends and I all turn into teenagers cramming for exams when we're on deadline.

You can get away with that when you're in your twenties and thirties but now that I'm in my fifties I think it's time to make a few positive changes. Maybe substitute a handful of almonds for the potato chips. Sliced turkey breast instead of pizza. Spend a little more time in the kitchen and a little less time scanning take-out menus.

[BACK TO TOP](#)



## MAKE AT HOME TAKE-OUT FAVORITES

The main thing you need to know before you try your hand at Asian cooking is the importance of doing your prep work before you approach your wok. (Don't have a wok? Don't let that stop you. A wok is a wonderful thing but a good-sized frying pan will work in a pinch.) Chop or slice your veggies and set them aside. Slice your beef or chicken or pork and start it marinating, if necessary. Get your shrimp ready to go. Take out all the ingredients you'll need for your sauce and mix them in a tiny bowl so it's ready when you are. Yes, it's a fair bit of work but it will make the rest of the job much, much easier.

### KUNG PAO CHICKEN

#### *Marinade Ingredients*

- 1 pound skinless, boneless chicken breast, cut into one-inch cubes
- 1 tablespoon oyster sauce
- 1 tablespoon dry sherry or Chinese rice wine
- 1 teaspoon cornstarch

#### *Sauce Ingredients*

- 3 tablespoons chicken broth
- 2 tablespoons white vinegar (I use a little more)
- 2 tablespoons soy sauce (I prefer dark soy)
- 2 teaspoons sugar
- Minced garlic, as much as your taste buds like
- Lots of crushed red pepper or whole tien tsin chiles
- 1 green pepper, cubed in a 3/4 inch dice
- 1 tablespoon corn starch dissolved in a few tablespoons water
- 1/4 - 1/2 cup unsalted peanuts

#### *Method*

Place the diced chicken breasts in a non-reactive bowl. Mix the oyster sauce, sherry, and cornstarch then add it to the chicken. Make sure the chicken pieces are coated in the mixture. Cover and refrigerate for at least an hour.

In another small bowl, mix the broth, vinegar, soy, and sugar. Set aside.

In yet another small bowl, mix the corn starch and water. Set side.

(I know this seems like an enormous pain in the butt--and it is--but having your ingredients ready to go before you start cooking is the true secret to successful Chinese cooking.)

Heat your wok then add a splash of oil. (I use plain old canola but peanut oil is even better. It has a higher smoke point.) Add your chicken. Make sure you separate the pieces. Keep them moving in the pan for maybe five minutes until thoroughly cooked. Remove from wok with slotted spoon. Keep warm on a platter.

Add your green pepper cubes to the wok along with the garlic and hot peppers. Keep the ingredients moving and whatever you do, please don't let the garlic burn! After two minutes add the sauce and bring to a boil. Then add the cornstarch solution and stir vigorously. The sauce will thicken like magic. Add the chicken. Then add a few handfuls of peanuts.

Serve over fluffy white rice. You'll never order take-out Kung Pao again.

[BACK TO TOP](#)

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## **SHREDDED BEEF IN SPICY SAUCE**

### ***Ingredients***

One pound filet mignon (or whatever stir fry beef you prefer) sliced into 1/2 inch thick strips. (One pound boneless, skinless chicken sliced in 1/2 inch strips may be substituted.)

Lots of scallions, sliced into matchsticks

Maybe 2 carrots, sliced into matchsticks

Maybe 2 celery stalks, sliced into matchsticks

2 tablespoons hot bean sauce

1 tablespoon sweet bean sauce

2 tablespoons dry sherry

1/2 teaspoon ground Szechuan peppercorns

1 tablespoon sugar

1/2 teaspoon salt

1 tablespoon sesame oil

4-6 cloves garlic, chopped fine

1 one-inch piece of peeled ginger

### ***Method***

Prepare your veggies and set them aside. Slice your beef into very thin pieces. Mix together in a small bowl the hot bean sauce, sweet bean sauce, dry sherry, sugar, sesame oil and set aside.

Add a splash of peanut oil (or canola) to a hot wok then quickly stir-fry the beef until cooked. Remove from wok to a bowl and set aside. Quickly add sliced celery, carrots, and scallions to wok and stir-fry. Sprinkle with the salt and ground Szechuan peppercorns. A little browning isn't a bad thing. Make sure you incorporate any bits of beef that were still in the pan. When the veggies are cooked to your liking (for me that means on the crisp side) add the sauce you previously mixed and set aside. Return the beef to the pan. Heat thoroughly and serve over white rice.

[BACK TO TOP](#)

\*\*\*



## **PEKING PARK SZECHUAN SHRIMP**

### ***Ingredients***

One pound medium shrimp, peeled and deveined

Six scallions, sliced into matchsticks

Water chestnuts to taste

4 cloves garlic, finely chopped

1 teaspoon finely chopped ginger

1/2 cup ketchup

1 tablespoon sesame oil

1 tablespoon soy sauce

1 tablespoon sugar

3 tablespoons dry sherry

Good splash of hot sauce or hot oil

3 tablespoons water

3 tablespoons corn starch dissolved in a few tablespoons of water and set aside

### ***Method***

In a small bowl, mix together the ketchup, sesame oil, soy, sugar, sherry, water, hot oil. Set aside.

Heat your wok, add your cooking oil (peanut or canola) then slide in your clean, dry shrimp. Quickly stir fry until they turn pink on both sides (maybe four minutes) then add the scallions, ginger, garlic, and water chestnuts (optional.) Stir fry for one to two minutes.

Add sauce. Bring to boil. Thicken with some of the corn starch mixture, if desired.

Serve over a bed of hot, fluffy white rice.

[BACK TO TOP](#)

\*\*\*

## **LAKE TUNG TING SHRIMP**

### ***Ingredients***

1 pound large shrimp  
2 tablespoons dry sherry  
1 tablespoon soy sauce  
1 teaspoon cornstarch  
1 egg white, beaten  
1/4 cup minced scallions  
3 cloves garlic, chopped  
1 teaspoon finely chopped ginger  
2 cups broccoli florets  
1/2 cup carrots, slice in matchsticks  
1/4 cup frozen peas  
1/4 cup dry white wine (I use Chablis or chardonnay)  
Shrimp broth, maybe 1/2 cup

### ***Method***

NOTE: This looks more confusing than it is. Read through it before you start cooking and it will all fall into place.

Prepare the marinade for the shrimp: in a medium, non-reactive bowl mix together one egg white, one teaspoon soy sauce, 2 tablespoons dry sherry, 1 heaping teaspoon corn starch.

Peel the shrimp and put the peels into a shallow pan filled with water. Bring to a slow boil and simmer for ten minutes. Remove shells, Reserve broth.

Rinse the peeled shrimp, dry them, then place them in a small bowl with the marinade. Cover and refrigerate for at least thirty minutes.

While the shrimp are marinating, heat your wok then add peanut or canola oil (maybe two or three tablespoons). When the oil is hot (it will only take thirty seconds or so) add the broccoli, carrots, scallions and stir fry making sure nothing burns. Add the garlic and ginger and again make sure nothing burns.

Push the veggies up the side of the wok to make room for the shrimp. (Or you can remove them to another bowl. Your choice.) Add the shrimp mixture (also add more oil if absolutely necessary) and quickly stir-fry the shrimp. Again make sure nothing burns. When the shrimp are pink and plump and ready, add the white wine and shrimp broth. Toss in the frozen peas. The mixture should be bright with green and orange veggies and pink shrimp, all surrounded by a pale sauce rich with egg white and soy sauce. If you like a thicker sauce, mix a little cornstarch with tap water, add to the wok and bring to a boil.

Serve on a bed of fluffy white rice.

[BACK TO TOP](#)

## MULTICULTURAL KITCHEN

### CATHY THACKER'S FAJITAS

Cathy Gillen Thacker and I met at an RWA conference in Chicago back in 1992. We shared a love of romance novels, a passion for writing, and a wonderful editor. Not to mention a few recipes over the years. This is one of the absolute best.

#### *Ingredients:*

3/4 cup balsamic vinegar (red wine is okay, too)

1/2 cup olive oil (you could use regular cooking oil if you like, but olive oil is far superior)

Lemon juice - a long, healthy squeeze

1/2 cup lime juice

Cumin, as much as you can handle

Oregano

Lots of salt and pepper

One or two cloves garlic, crushed

1 small onion, finely-chopped

#### *Method*

Mix the above ingredients in a shallow, non-reactive container. You can use it to marinate chicken breasts, boneless strip steaks, whatever suits your grilling fancy. Marinate for a few hours or overnight. This is a very agreeable, adaptable recipe.

When you're ready, fire up the barbecue, grill the marinated meats to the desired degree of doneness, then slice and serve along with grilled red and green pepper strips and onions that have also done time in the marinade.

You know how to serve fajitas, right? Offer up platters of warm flour or corn tortillas, bowls of salsa (Pace Picante is wonderful), chopped tomatoes, raw onion slices, cheddar and jack cheeses, sour cream, and the ubiquitous guacamole.

[BACK TO TOP](#)

\*\*\*

## **GREEK SPINACH PIE (SPANAKOPITA)**

This is one of those dishes that look infinitely harder to make than they actually are. Spanakopita is all about preparation and assembly. Your oven will do most of the cooking. Read this recipe a few times. Make sure you have all of your ingredients ready to go before you start. Once you get the hang of it, you'll add this to your list of favorites.

### ***Ingredients:***

1 package frozen phyllo dough (thawed to room temperature)

1 10 oz package frozen chopped spinach, thawed and drained well (You can use fresh spinach; you can use twice as much spinach. It's up to you.)

1 onion, chopped

Oregano

Crushed red pepper flakes (not traditional anywhere but in my kitchen)

1 pound crumbled feta (maybe less)

8 eggs, beaten (maybe more, maybe less)

1 stick of butter, melted.

### ***Method***

The prep work is vital! You have to have all of your ingredients ready to go once you open up that box of phyllo dough or you're doomed. Phyllo turns to parchment once it hits the air, so make sure you keep a slightly damp, clean dish towel over the sheets while you prepare the pie.

Saute your chopped onion in a little olive oil until translucent. Add lots of oregano and crushed red pepper, if you like. Let cool to room temperature.

Melt 1 stick of butter in the microwave. It usually takes 35 seconds or so. Set on the counter with your other ingredients.

You'll need a large baking pan; a lasagna pan would be perfect. Brush melted butter along the bottom and up the sides then lay two pieces of phyllo dough down lengthwise. Butter them. Lay two pieces of phyllo dough down crosswise. Butter them. Repeat twice. In a huge bowl, beat 8 eggs. To the eggs add the crumbled feta, the sautéed onions, the thawed and drained spinach. Mix together then pour into baking pan. This is where Cook's Choice comes into play. How does the mixture look? Does there seem to be enough liquid? What about the ratio of spinach to feta? Do you need to add more? Eyeball it closely and make adjustments (or not) as your instincts tell



you. Layer more phyllo dough lengthwise; butter well. Layer phyllo dough crosswise; butter well. Repeat until you have eight or ten buttered layers.

With a sharp knife, cut a few 1" slits across the top.

Slide into 350 degree oven and bake for anywhere from 1 hour to 1 hour and 40 minutes. You want a deep golden brown outside and a fully-cooked inside.

Let stand for fifteen minutes or so before serving.

[BACK TO TOP](#)

\*\*\*

## **PASTA PUTTANESCA**

You know the story behind this dish, don't you? Just in case you don't, this is called (among other names) harlot's pasta, whore's pasta, working girl's pasta. Legend has it that this is the dish the prostitutes of Italy whipped together when they needed quick sustenance between engagements. True or false? Who knows. It's delicious, though, that much I do know.

**NOTE:** You don't really have to count your capers or black olives. Use your own judgment and make it your own. The day I actually count a caper is the day I hang up my apron!

### ***Ingredients***

1 pound penne (or whatever pasta you fancy)

2 tablespoon salt

1/4 cup extra virgin (yes, I see the irony) olive oil

4 cloves thinly sliced garlic

1 teaspoon crushed red pepper flakes (or to taste)

20 capers, drained of brine, crushed (I use maybe a heaping tablespoon and mash them with the back of a fork)

24 black olives (I use Lindsay black olives, sliced)

2 anchovy filets, smashed into a paste (or a good squeeze of anchovy paste in a tube)

3 cups basic tomato sauce (you can substitute crushed tomatoes or a few cups of pasta sauce)

1 bunch finely chopped flat leaf Italian parsley

### ***Method***

In large skillet, place oil, garlic, and red pepper flakes. Cook over medium heat until garlic begins to turn light golden -- maybe 1 minute. Add capers, olives, anchovies, and continue cooking 1 minute. Add 3 cups basic tomato sauce and bring to a boil. Lower heat and simmer while you make the pasta.

Cook penne according to directions. Drain. Pour drained pasta into skillet. Turn heat up and cook 1 minute until thoroughly mixed. Stir in chopped parsley. Add freshly grated cheese. (Everything's better with cheese!)

[BACK TO TOP](#)

\*\*\*

## **ALMOST PERFECT CHICKEN PAD THAI**

I've been on a long search for the perfect Chicken Pad Thai. So far this is the closest I've come to the wonderful take-out from our beloved Thai Kitchen III:

### ***Ingredients***

1 tablespoon soy sauce

1 tablespoon water

1 tablespoon creamy peanut butter

1 teaspoon Asian chili paste, such as sambal oelek

3 tablespoon canola oil

1 teaspoon minced garlic

1 teaspoon minced ginger

1/2 cup carrots, yellow squash, zucchini & whatever you like. Preferably julienned

4 ounces boneless, skinless chicken breast or thigh, sliced into strips (similar in size to the veggies above)

1/4 pound medium-wide rice noodles, soaked in warm water until softened and drained

1 tablespoon light brown sugar

1 tablespoon cider vinegar

Chopped Romaine lettuce (makes a wonderful serving bed)

Chopped peanuts, to sprinkle over the top for crunch and sheer deliciousness

### ***Method***

Whisk together the soy sauce, water, peanut butter, and chili paste until smooth.

Heat a large wok over medium-high heat, and add canola oil. When the oil is hot, add the garlic and ginger and let cook until fragrant, about 1 minute. Be careful! Don't let it brown. Add the vegetables and chicken. Stir-fry until chicken is cooked through maybe 2 to 4 minutes. Add noodles and toss to coat. (Feel free to make any substitute what works for you if you can't find rice noodles. I've even seen this with rice or plain old Ronzoni spaghetti! Not traditional Thai by any means but whatever works in a pinch.)

Add peanut/spice paste, brown sugar and cider vinegar to wok and toss with abandon. Heat through.

I like to pile the chopped romaine on a big glass platter. Place the Pad Thai on top of the romaine and top with chopped peanuts. Some people enjoy a sprinkling of cilantro leaves or a splash of lime. Your choice.

[BACK TO TOP](#)



It's feast or famine around here when I'm on a book deadline. Either the kitchen is alive with pots of soup and rising yeast breads or else Domino's has a delivery person assigned specifically to us. There is no middle ground.

I was in full cooking mode today, probably because my brain isn't working on all four burners. No matter how long and diligently I sat at the computer, the words wouldn't come. Let's face it: a writer knows she's got a problem when even her imaginary friends won't behave themselves!

Finally, around three o'clock, I decided to take a break and wandered into the kitchen for a glass of iced tea. Who am I kidding? I went in search of chocolate! I didn't find anything suitably sinful but I did notice the fresh tortellini with sun-dried tomatoes that Roy had brought home from the Italian deli earlier in the day and I was overcome with the urge to make a batch of pesto.

I took the paper skins off the garlic and popped them into the Cuisinart. I toasted walnuts for the pesto. (Yes, walnuts. One day I wanted to make pesto and discovered I was out of pine nuts, so I substituted and a new favorite was born. Cooking, like life, is equal parts talent and accommodation. The best recipes are usually happy accidents.) A beautiful wedge of Locatelli Romano. A huge pile of freshly-washed basil. Extra virgin olive oil. I might not have accomplished much at the computer today but I know we'll eat well tonight.

[BACK TO TOP](#)

## **SALADS**

### **MILLIE'S FAMOUS COLE SLAW**

#### ***Ingredients***

3/4 cup sugar

1/2 teaspoon onion salt

2 tablespoons white vinegar

1 quart Miracle Whip

Celery seed

Mix thoroughly.

#### ***Method***

This makes a lot of cole slaw dressing. Pour it over shredded cabbage, carrots, onion, and apple. You decide the amounts. The dressing keeps nicely in a covered jar for maybe a week.

[BACK TO TOP](#)

\*\*\*

### **SPICY CHINESE PEPPER SALAD**

#### ***Ingredients***

3tablespoons olive oil

3tablespoons sesame oil

10 large peppers (mix red and green and yellow, if possible)

6 cloves finely minced garlic

3tablespoons soy sauce

1 tablespoon red chili paste (I add more)

1 tablespoon red wine vinegar

1/4 cup sherry or Marsala

1 tablespoon sugar

Lemon

Salt and pepper

### ***Method***

In a large wok or skillet, heat oils until very hot. Add peppers and cook over high heat, stirring constantly, until they soften. Maybe ten minutes? Add remaining ingredients and cook until peppers are tender and the liquid reduces a bit. Lower the heat. Stir. Keep your eye on it. Don't let anything burn. This takes longer than you think. Be patient with it. Allow 30 minutes or so. The longer it cooks, the better it tastes.

Speaking of taste, this salad is at its best room temperature or slightly chilled.

[BACK TO TOP](#)

\*\*\*

## **BANZAI SALAD WITH GINGER DRESSING**

Oh, how I wish you could have been there when Mount Fuji came to Long Island! The year was 1973, back in those dark days when fresh ginger was so rare that you actually had to either mail order it or take the LIRR into the city and go down to Chinatown to find it.

Mount Fuji was a sprawling restaurant right in the heart of Jericho Turnpike in Huntington, a nondescript one-story building with a big parking lot. You would never know from its unassuming exterior that inside lay all the glamour and exotic excitement that Japan had to offer. Was it a Benihana rip-off? Of course it was. The long communal tables, the flashy tableside cooks with the Samurai knife skills, the regular suspects sizzling on that grill, filling the air with the luscious aromas of chicken and beef and shrimp and onions and sesame and squash and garlic.

A trip to Mount Fuji made us, in those pre-sushi pre-everything days, feel like world travelers. We even loved it when a certain husband, who shall remain nameless, told the hostess that it was my birthday and I had the singular experience of being lifted up and out of my seat by six singing Samurai chefs all crying, "*Banzai! Banzai!*"

It was a time it was, a time indeed.

This is the salad we loved then and love still, thirty years down the road and far, far away.

### ***Ingredients***

1/4 cup soy sauce

1/3 cup peanut oil

1/4 cup vinegar (white)

1 six ounce can tomato paste (use maybe 2/3 of it)

1/2 medium yellow onion

1 nice-sized chunk of fresh ginger (maybe two inches long) - make sure you peel it

Juice of one or two lemons (yes the squirt bottle is okay)

Juice of one or two oranges (OJ from the container is fine)

### ***Method***

Throw all of the above into your Cuisinart or blender Mix wildly until it's thoroughly combined and lusciously thick and the smell of ginger is making your mouth water.

The salad at Mount Fuji never varied and we always loved it. Why mess with a good thing. Toss some chopped iceberg (yes, iceberg) into a nice big bowl, add fresh tomato, green pepper rings, red onion, and lots of shredded red cabbage. Use as much (or as little) dressing as your taste buds require.

*Banzai!*

[BACK TO TOP](#)

\*\*\*

## **GREEK SALAD A LA OLD NEIGHBORHOOD**

There were two things you could always find at any diner in our old neighborhood: a great Greek salad and a bowl of Manhattan Clam. We lived within walking distance of the Olympic Diner on Deer Park Avenue and just about every day I found my way there for a salad or a bowl of soup or even just a cup of tea and a toasted blueberry muffin.

Their Greek salads remain the best I've ever had. They were always served on a glass plate with lots of juicy pepperoncini, anchovies (which they quickly learned to omit from mine) and two dolmades -- tender grape leaves stuffed with tangy rice infused with mint. But it was the dressing that lifted it above the pack. I tried and tried to duplicate it and after one particularly depressing failure, I asked one of the owners what on earth was in that dressing that made it so special and, God love him, he told me: tomato juice.

This is a seat-of-your-pants salad dressing. We adore it and make it by the quart. (It lasts a full week in the fridge.)

### ***Dressing Ingredients***

1 6 ounce can tomato juice

3/4 cup olive oil

2 tablespoons Dijon

Garlic, as much as you like

1/2 to 3/4 cup red wine vinegar (I use almost a cup)

Dried oregano, as much as you like

1 teaspoon sugar

Dump all of the above in your Cuisinart or your blender and mix the hell out of it. The owner said the secret was in the mixing and he was right. Three or four minutes won't hurt. You want it thoroughly blended until it's almost creamy.

### ***Salad Ingredients***

Iceberg, chopped (really, iceberg is the best for this)

Radishes

Pepperoncini

Lots of crumbled feta

Dolmades, if you like

Anchovies (you don't have to--I won't tell!)

Green pepper rings

Red onion rings

Lots of ripe red tomato

### ***Method***

Toss everything in a big glass bowl.



Looks beautiful, tastes divine. Aphrodite would be proud.

[BACK TO TOP](#)

\*\*\*

## **STAYING HOME TONIGHT BROCCOLI SALAD**

We love broccoli around here. We love it almost any way you can eat it. Danielle introduced us to the wonders of Broccoli Salad back in the early 1970s and we never looked back. IT was Memorial Day, the year before she got married, and we were having a picnic in our backyard. We barbecued chicken. My sister-in-law brought the desserts. Danielle brought Broccoli Salad and a tradition was born

The thing about this salad is -- well, it's the garlic. We use lots of it. An unholy amount. And once you use it and eat it, you'd better plan on staying home because you will be radiating eau de garlique from every pore.

But it's worth it. This tastes great warm, room temperature, or chilled. It's even not so bad the second day, although why you would have leftovers is a mystery to me.

### ***Ingredients***

Broccoli, as much as you like, washed and sliced in 1" sections on the diagonal

Splash of very plain salad oil

Lemons

Fresh garlic, as many cloves as you like, sliced paper thin

Dash of salt

### ***Method***

Steam the broccoli until it's a half-step from the way you like it. One caveat: don't let it turn into mush, please. You want it to have a little backbone.

Place steamed broccoli in a large shallow bowl. Lightly - and I mean lightly -- drizzle broccoli with an innocuous salad oil like Wesson. Barely enough to make a difference. So little that you wonder why you even bothered with it. Sprinkle the thinly sliced garlic all over the broccoli. Be daring! Now squeeze fresh lemon juice all over everything. (Feel free to use the frozen Minute Maid pure lemon juice in the yellow plastic bottle if necessary. Don't let the lack of fresh lemons

keep you away from this salad.)Toss. You can eat it now. You can wait until it reaches room temperature. Or you can refrigerate it for a while and eat it chilled.

If you love garlic, you will think you're in heaven.

[BACK TO TOP](#)

\*\*\*

### **PANZANELLA (BREAD SALAD TO DIE FOR)**

Words fail me. I am a salad-loving woman and this is the salad I love the most.

One evening we were dining at a pricey Italian restaurant in a fancy hotel where they served Panzanella as an appetizer. I loved it so much that I told them to forget about my Pasta Primavera and just bring me another plate of bread salad. I could eat this every day, all summer long. It's great any time of the year, but it borders on the sublime in July when the tomatoes are fresh from the vine. Sometimes I add a healthy amount of crumbled feta cheese which turns it into Greek Bread Salad.

I'm telling you, if you love good crusty bread and you love tomatoes and you love the way garlic and red wine vinegar and olive oil work together then you are going to love this.

(And pay no attention to the fussy instructions. Who cares how big your tomatoes are anyway? Hack them up any old way. You can't ruin this.)

#### ***Ingredients***

2 tablespoons red wine vinegar (I use much more)

2 garlic cloves, minced and mashed to a paste with a pinch of salt

Pepper, to taste

1/2 cup extra virgin olive oil (I use much less)

4 cups 3/4 inch cubes of crusty bread (preferably with sesame seeds)

Red onion, sliced paper thin

1 pound vine-ripened red tomatoes, cut into 3/4 inch wedges

1 pound vine-ripened yellow tomatoes, cut into 3/4 inch wedges (nice, but not necessary)

1/2 cup ripe black or Kalamata olives (I prefer the black)

1/2 cup fresh basil leaves, washed well, spun dry, and chopped fine

### ***Method***

In a bowl whisk together the vinegar, garlic paste, and pepper to taste and whisk in oil until emulsified. Add the remaining ingredients and salt to taste and toss to combine well. Let salad stand at room temp fifteen minutes to allow bread to soak up some dressing

***TIP:*** The easiest way to chop the basil is to chiffonade the leaves: roll them as tightly as you can then slice with a sharp knife.

[BACK TO TOP](#)

\*\*\*



### **PARROT SALAD**

Of course it's not really parrot salad, but it is a salad I shared with a parrot in Houston a long time ago.

Years ago I was the dinner speaker at a big writers conference in Houston. I flew in a day early so I could hang out with my friend Linda who was determined to show me everything Houston had to offer. (And it has a lot to offer, believe me.) She met me at the airport in a limousine (complete with gorgeous driver) champagne, and hors d'oeuvres. The greeting was so wonderful that I was almost able to forget the fact that my luggage was missing.

Anyway, we had a blast that day. We rode from one side of the city to another and when we stopped mid-day at her house for a quick lunch, we discovered my garment bag waiting for me in front of her door. Unfortunately it had been left on top of the sprinklers and the sprinklers had gone off and -- well, it wasn't a pretty sight

This delicious salad, however, almost made up for what happened to my poor clothes. Linda served the salad on chilled glass plates and the combination of dark greens, pale celery, tan almonds, and purple onions was a joy to behold. Seated opposite me on the back of a kitchen chair was her parrot, a big African grey named Corey, who spent the better part of our lunch break trying to figure out how to get the almonds away from me.

That poor Polly didn't know who he was up against. I have three wily parrots at home just like him and I know all the moves.

I did, however, give him one almond and an orange slice and he allowed me to retain all of my fingers. A fair exchange, don't you think?

### ***Ingredients***

1/4 cup salad oil (olive oil has too distinctive a taste for this; if you ask me this is too much oil)

2 tablespoons sugar

2 teaspoons malt vinegar (too little vine for me)

1/4 teaspoon salt

1/4 teaspoon almond extract

6 cups torn mixed greens

1 cup thinly sliced celery

3 medium oranges peeled sliced crosswise halved

2 tablespoons sliced scallions

1/3 cups toasted slivered almonds

### ***Method***

Combine oil, sugar, vinegar, salt, almond extract. Mix, mix and mix again until it emulsifies. Mix longer than a sane person would even consider mixing. This makes all the diff in the world. Chill.

(Personally I don't care for the traditional balance of oil to vinegar. It tastes like a Valdez special to me. We tend to reverse it in favor of vinegar over oil. You do what tastes right to you.)

At serving time, arrange your mixed greens in a large bowl, then add oranges, celery, and onions. Sprinkle with almonds. Pour dressing over and toss.

Serve immediately or the parrot will eat it all.

[BACK TO TOP](#)

\*\*\*

## **COLD SHRIMP WITH BASIL MAYONNAISE**

I have always been a cold shrimp and cocktail sauce kind of girl. The sauce must be red. It must contain copious amounts of horseradish, lemon juice, Worcestershire, and Tabasco. You can leave out the shrimp but don't mess with my cocktail sauce!

Well, that all changed last summer when I was dipping a dainty piece of grilled Portobello into a luscious basil mayo and the thought occurred to me that maybe one of those plump firm perfectly chilled shrimp on Roy's plate might benefit from a touch of the pale green sauce. So I stole one. And I dipped it. And I nearly slid under the table from the absolute wonderfulness of it. Roy was about to complain about the theft of one of his shrimp when I pointed toward the sauce and sighed with pleasure.

What a perfect combination. What sensual bliss. What a big change from cocktail sauce.

And it's easy too.

### ***Ingredients***

Shrimp, as many as you want, whatever size you like - just make sure they are plump, firm, and perfectly chilled

1 cup mayo (homemade would be great but Hellman's is just fine)

1/4 cup basil leaves (1/2 cup wouldn't hurt)

1 teaspoon lemon zest

1 tablespoon lemon juice

### ***Method***

Place ingredients in blender or food process and whirl until smooth.

There are fancier ways to make this but this is a wonderful place to start.

[BACK TO TOP](#)

My mother used to worry that she would leave nothing of value behind for me when she died. She was so delighted when Daddy presented her with a beautiful emerald ring not long after they moved here. "Your inheritance," she used to say with a laugh each time I admired the dazzling gem. She loved that ring, loved its beauty and especially that Daddy chose it for her, but I think she especially loved the fact that one day it would belong to me.

The ring is mine now. I love it but she was very wrong when she said that was the only thing of value she had to leave me. She left love behind, and wonderful memories, and -- to my eternal delight -- her recipes.

Daddy and I used to tease her mercilessly about her love of soup-making. He was the Ultimate Carnivore and not terribly fond of slurpable dinner while I thought a can of Campbell's Cream of Celery soup was haute cuisine. We always moaned and groaned each time she made a pot of soup. "Laugh all you want," she'd say. "That means there's more for me."

Well, I grew up and wouldn't you know I ended up loving soup every bit as much as she did. I love to make soup and I love to eat it too. I especially love it when the soup involved is one of hers.

[BACK TO TOP](#)

## SOUPS

For a while there I honestly thought I could move mountains. When my father was first diagnosed with cancer in January 1996, I refused to believe we wouldn't beat the disease and I set my mind to fighting it with everything in my arsenal. My husband was crazy enough to believe right along with me and together we convinced my mother that the three of us could be strong enough and positive enough to show my father that he still had plenty of life left to live.

I'm not quite sure how it happened but my mother and I came to the conclusion that Pasta e Fagiole (Pasta Fazool) could cure just about anything and we embarked on the Great Pasta Fazool Contest. Every night after we got home from the hospital after visiting Daddy, we would repair to our respective kitchens and whip up a bowl of pasta fazool. The next morning we would exchange Tupperwares of the stuff, rate it, discuss changes, then eat the contents and start all over again.

It was a silly ritual but powerful in its own way. Soup is the epitome of home cooking. Few things are more comforting than the sight and smell of soup simmering on the back burner on a cold winter's day. The world could be falling apart around you but a good bowl of soup just might keep you from falling apart along with it.

This is the version we ended up liking the best. (The secret to a great pasta fazool is at the end of the recipe.)

### **SUPERWOMAN SYNDROME PASTA FAZOOOL**

#### ***Ingredients***

1 teaspoon olive oil  
1 pound. ground beef (optional; my mother used it but I didn't)  
1 onion, chopped fine  
4 large carrots, sliced thin  
4 stalks of celery, chopped  
3 cups (24 ounces) canned diced tomatoes  
1 can dark red kidney beans (or light; I mean, what does it matter?)  
1 can white kidney beans (or cannellini beans)  
5 or 6 cups of beef stock (or College Inn broth or a good beef soup base and filtered water)  
Oregano, as much as your taste buds demand  
Black pepper, to taste  
Flat leaf Italian parsley, chopped fine -- maybe 6 tablespoons



Tabasco, to taste

3 cups (more or less) leftover homemade spaghetti sauce

8 oz. dry macaroni (ditalini is best)

### ***Method***

Brown beef in soup pot. Drain. Wipe the bottom of the pot with a paper towel to remove excess fat. Add onions, carrots, celery, and tomatoes. Simmer for maybe 10 minutes. Drain and rinse the kidney beans then add them to the soup pot. Add the cooked beef, oregano, pepper, Tabasco, spaghetti sauce. Simmer hard for maybe 45 minutes or so then add the dry pasta shells. (Medium is best.) Let simmer slowly the longer the better. You can eat this as soon as the pasta is cooked and it will taste just fine . . . or you can be very patient and let time work its magic and turn a good soup into something spectacular.

PS: Want the secret to a truly great pasta fazool? Do what my friend Liz from the old neighborhood taught me to do: add the rind from a wedge of Parmigiano Reggiano or Locatelli Romano to the soup pot. Yes, the rind with maybe a quarter-inch or so of cheese still clinging to it. (Don't have a cheese rind? Add a few generous tablespoons of freshly grated Romano or Parmesan instead.) The cheese will slowly melt into the soup making every spoonful a passport to Italy.

Mangia! Mangia!

[BACK TO TOP](#)

\*\*\*

## **DEADLINE SOUP OR MINESTRA DI SPINACI (SPINACH SOUP)**

### ***Ingredients***

1 1/2 pounds fresh spinach (or 2 10-ounce packages frozen spinach) washed and chopped  
(Believe me, the frozen works absolutely great)

6 cups chicken broth

3 cloves crushed garlic - or more or less or whatever you like. (We use much more.)

1/2 cup long-grain rice

1/2 teaspoon ground nutmeg (works with or without)

1 tablespoon fresh lemon juice

Pepper

Salt

1/4 cup grated Locatelli Romano cheese

### ***Method***

Place broth, garlic, and spinach in large pot. Bring to boil, add rice, nutmeg, lemon juice, salt, pepper, and simmer until the rice is cooked.

Serve hot with Romano cheese and pepper.

This is so good you would think you'd spent hours slaving over a hot stove. Quick and delicious: exactly what you need when time is at a premium and there's a chapter begging to be written.

[BACK TO TOP](#)

\*\*\*

## **MUSHROOM BARLEY SOUP**

What could be better than a brisk walk on a cold and sunny day in autumn? You guessed it: a wonderful pot of soup simmering away on the stove, waiting for you when you come home. Roy found this recipe many years ago and it quickly became one of our favorites. It takes almost no time at all to prepare, is reasonably healthful, and tastes fantastic. Soup just doesn't get any better than this!

### ***Ingredients:***

1 lb sliced white mushrooms

2 cloves garlic, minced

1 onion, chopped (or however you like your soup onions)

3 carrots, sliced

2 stalks celery with greens attached, sliced

4 T butter

1/2 to 1 full 6 oz can tomato paste

10 C beef stock (or broth)

1 bay leaf

Few pinches of parsley

Health splash of Worcestershire sauce

Splash of Tabasco

Barley

### ***Method***

Melt four tablespoons of butter in a heavy soup pot. Add garlic, onion, and 1/2 lb of the sliced mushrooms. (Some people prefer to slice half of the mushrooms and chop the other half. Your preference.) Saute maybe three or four minutes until soft. Add celery, carrots, bay leaf, parsley. Add beef broth, Worcestershire and Tabasco to taste. Salt and pepper, to taste. Bring to a boil, then lower heat to a simmer. Simmer thirty minutes. Add three or four handfuls of barley. Cover. Simmer low until done.

[BACK TO TOP](#)

\*\*\*

## **SNOWY DAY CREAM OF CELERY SOUP**

When I was a kid, my idea of culinary heaven was a bowl of cream of celery soup. Campbell's cream of celery in the red and white can. Nothing short of meeting Superman in person could have made me any happier than sitting by the radiator in the kitchen, slurping up soup and watching the snow fall.

I sit by a different window these days and have pretty much given up on meeting Superman, but I still love cream of celery soup.

### ***Ingredients:***

2 cups chopped celery

2 cups chopped carrots

4 tablespoons butter

2 cups onions, diced

3 tablespoons flour

6 cups hot chicken broth (or vegetable, if you prefer)

Salt and pepper

1 cup heavy cream

### ***Method***

In a small saucepan add 1 cup celery, 1 cup carrots, 1 cup vegetable broth. Bring to a boil , reduce heat, then cook until tender. Maybe 4 minutes? Drain and set aside. In a larger saucepan, melt butter over medium heat. Add onions and saute until clear. Whisk in flour, cook 2 minutes making sure flour does not brown. You just want to get rid of that "raw" floury taste. Add 5 cups broth and continue to whisk until mixture boils, making sure to reach the bottom of the pan. (If it doesn't boil, it won't thicken.) Add 1 cup raw celery and 1 cup raw carrots. Bring mixture to a boil again, reduce heat, and simmer about 30 minutes. When cooked, strain soup through a fine sieve into a clean pot reserving vegetables. In a blender puree vegetables with 1 1/2 cups of liquid. Stir puree into pot with liquid. Stir in cream, reserved vegetables. Heat and serve.

[BACK TO TOP](#)

\*\*\*

## **CAPE MAY CLAM CHOWDER**

### ***Ingredients***

3 cans of chopped clams with juice (of course you can use fresh if you like)

2 bottles clam juice (I prefer Snow's) plus one clam juice bottle of water

3 slices bacon

1 large onion, chopped

1 green pepper, chopped

2 carrots, chopped

3 celery stalk, chopped

2 potatoes, peeled and diced

2 tablespoons parsley, chopped

1/4 teaspoon thyme

1/4 teaspoon basil

1/4 teaspoon marjoram

1 tablespoon sugar

4 medium tomatoes, peeled and chopped or 2 cans diced tomatoes

Salt and pepper, to taste

### ***Method***

Fry bacon in saucepan. Add onion, green pepper, carrots and celery. Cook until tender. Add clam broth w/ one clam juice bottle of water, potatoes, thyme, parsley, salt and pepper, sugar. Cook 15 min. Let cool. Add chopped clams and tomatoes and juice from tomatoes. Reheat for 7 min. Serve hot. I like mine tomato-y. You might want to adjust this accordingly.

[BACK TO TOP](#)

\*\*\*

## **KANSAS CITY STEAK SOUP, NJ STYLE**

Kansas City is one of my favorite places. I went there for the first time in 1985. Roy had to go there on business and I tagged along. (One of the best things about being a writer: have keyboard, can travel.) Anyway, aside from the frequent tornado warnings that almost turned my hair grey and the breathtaking dark green of the rolling lawns, I discovered the wonders of steak soup. (I'm an occasional vegetarian.)

Anyway, I've had the pleasure of returning to K.C. a number of times to attend MARA's wonderful conference and during one of those visits a good friend presented me with the recipe for Plaza III Steak Soup.

I owe her big time.

Here, with a few minor alterations to the original recipe, is my version:

### ***Ingredients***

4 tablespoons butter

1 / 2 cup flour

20 ounces beef broth (College Inn Broth is wonderful)

1/4 cups carrot, diced

1/4 cups celery, diced

1/2 cups onions, diced

1 can Rotel diced tomatoes (or Chi Chi's)

3/4 teaspoon Kitchen Bouquet (or Gravy Master or skip this entirely)

Black pepper

One bag of frozen mixed vegetables (maybe 10 ounces? The amount is really up to you)

1/2 pound ground beef

### ***Method***

In separate pan, brown the ground beef until fully cooked. Drain. (I even rinse away the fat but that's my own peculiarity.)

Melt butter in medium soup pot. Don't brown! Add flour and stir to form a smooth roux. Cook mixture over medium heat, without browning for 3 minutes, stirring constantly. Add broth to the roux and stir until smooth and slightly thickened. Bring to a full boil. Add fresh vegetables, tomatoes, and seasonings and bring back to a boil. Reduce heat and simmer until vegetables are barely tender. Maybe 20 minutes? Add frozen vegetables and cooked ground beef. Simmer an additional 15 minutes.

Of course you'll serve this in a hollowed-out bread bowl, right?

[BACK TO TOP](#)

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## **TEX-AMISH CHICKEN CORN CHOWDER**

Now you'll have to trust me on this one. I couldn't quite imagine Tex-Amish food until I made this phenomenal (and phenomenally low-fat!) soup myself and immediately elevated it to Super Keeper Status. Corn and chicken chowder with a splash of jalapeños. You'll love it. Trust me . . .

### ***Ingredients***

2 T butter

1 small onion, finely chopped

2 stalks celery, finely chopped

1 jalapeno, finely chopped (discard seeds if you don't want it too hot; pre-sliced jalapeños in a jar work well if fresh are unavailable)

2 T flour

3 cups milk (1% or fat-free work great in this)

1 large can creamed corn

1 1/2 cups frozen corn

2 cups cooked chicken (soup is equally delicious without this)

Cayenne pepper

Salt & pepper

### ***Method***

Melt butter in good-sized soup pot. Add onion, celery, and jalapeno. Saute for 3 or 4 minutes. Stir in flour. Cook 1 or 2 minutes to eliminate the raw taste of flour. Add milk, creamed corn, frozen corn, chicken. Bring to a boil (or a few degrees shy of a boil; I prefer this method) and keep stirring until mixture thickens. Lower heat and simmer for ten or fifteen minutes.

[BACK TO TOP](#)

\*\*\*

## **ATLANTIC CITY ZUPPA A LA WISEGUYS**

Tucked away on a dark and deserted side street in Atlantic City hides the most wonderful southern Italian restaurant on earth. We've eaten there at least a half dozen times and I still can't tell you the name of the place. It's not written on the window. It's not on the door. There are no matchbooks imprinted with the name, no identifying marks on the menu. It's just there. You'll have to trust me on that.

Now I'm not exactly sure how to classify this dish. Is it an appetizer (all those glorious clams) (and what about that garlicky toasty bruschetta) or is it really a soup? You see, the heart of this dish is a red broth fragrant with clams, white wine, tons of finely-chopped garlic, and a blizzard of flat leaf Italian parsley. The tomatoes are sweet, the clam juice is pungent, the white wine adds biting dryness, the garlic makes your mouth water, while the parsley makes you think of Sicily in the spring.

When we order this, Roy eats the clams and we split the two pieces of bruschetta, but the broth is all mine.

I cobbled this recipe together from the chef's instructions, the Rao's Cookbook, and my friend Patti's mother.

### ***Ingredients***

36 fresh littleneck or cherrystone clams (Feel free to substitute 4 large cans of whole baby clams with juice. That's what I do.)

1/4 cup olive oil

6-8 garlic cloves, peeled and finely minced or pressed



1 35 ounce can San Marzano tomatoes, drained and crushed (NOTE: San Marzano plum tomatoes are worth hunting down. You can find them on the Web and in many Italian delis or specialty stores. There were as common as ham and eggs in the old neighborhood but tougher to find here. Redpack makes a great substitute. You want a tomato-y tomato.)

4 cups bottled clam juice

1/2 cup dry white wine

Oregano, dried or fresh (finely chopped)

Crushed red pepper (knock yourself out!)

4 or 5 leaves fresh basil

Salt and pepper, to taste

As much chopped Italian parsley as your palate demands

### ***Method***

Rinse the clams under cold water. Drain in colander. Or just open the cans. Heat olive oil in a large saucepan or skillet. Saute garlic for one minute until faintly golden. ***Do not burn the garlic*** or you'll ruin the broth.

Add the clams, either fresh or canned.

Add tomatoes, clam juice, white wine, oregano, crushed red pepper flakes.

Raise heat and bring to a boil. Lower to a simmer and cook for 7 or 8 minutes or until liquid begins to reduce.

Cover and cook an additional 5 minutes until clams open or would have opened if you hadn't used them straight from a can. Add basil, salt, and pepper. (Of course you know you should toss out any clams that don't open. Promise me you'll do this.)

While everything is humming along, you should slice into some gorgeous crusty Italian bread, preferably the kind with sesame seeds. Brush both sides lightly with olive oil, and grill the slices until you have some beautiful char marks. (You can use a grill pan on top of the stove or your George Foreman. In a pinch, run them under the broiler. I won't tell.)

Now here's how they serve it in the Unknown Italian Restaurant in Atlantic City. You want a nice big soup plate. Preferably white. Arrange the clams prettily in the center. Crisscross two slices of bruschetta and lean them up against the inside of the bowl. Maybe use a few clams to keep them standing upright. If you used the canned clams you can still make it look authentic. Many fancy cooking stores sell immaculately cleaned clam shells for just this sort of sneakiness. Anyway, you've arranged the clams in the bowl, you've leaned your bruschetta against the side, now ladle in a liberal amount of that gorgeous garlicky wine-y tomato-y basil-y broth. Enough to tease the clams but not drown them.

Now raise a glass to Tony Soprano and you're in business.

[BACK TO TOP](#)

Nothing on earth is more complicated than the mother-daughter relationship. My mother loved me. That's a given. But occasionally we'd hit one of those bumps in the road that only another daughter could possibly understand.

Roy came into the house that particular Friday night after checking to see if he needed to top off the oil in my Buick. He was carrying a plastic Shoprite bag containing a medium-sized Tupperware container. "What's this?" he asked. "I found it in the back seat."

"The mashed turnips," I said and then groaned. "I didn't know Mom left them back there for me." The truth is, I didn't need or want the turnips. It was the week after Thanksgiving and I'd eaten enough mashed turnips in the last eight days to qualify for a farm subsidy. But now I had another bumper crop on my hands and all because the words "No, thank you," were studded with landmines.

Let me tell you how it happened. I had called my mother earlier that day to ask if she wanted to join me on a couple of quick errands. She said of course she would then added, "I made up another batch of turnips and set aside a Tupperware for you." Now I knew we weren't going to be eating any turnip-friendly meals over the next few days and my freezer was filled with the results of my crazed soup-making binges so I thanked her very much and said I would decline this time around and I told her why.

Big mistake. You would have thought I'd told her to stick the turnips where the sun don't shine. My words were met with silence. A huffy silence. A storm of hurt feelings transmitting themselves on that frequency only daughters can hear.

"Thanks for the offer," I said carefully, "but we'll be eating Italian for the next few days and my freezer's overloaded. You and Daddy eat meat-and-potato meals. Maybe it's better if you enjoy the turnips this time."

I guess I don't have to tell you that it was all downhill from there. By the time we hung up I knew I'd be lucky to ever see another mashed turnip from her again as long as I live.

So how did the plastic container of turnips end up in the back seat, you ask. Easy. I'm a wimp, that's how. I caved. I folded. I rolled over and played dead all in the name of Daughterly Terror. I smiled and took that Tupperware and steeled myself for a week of mashed turnip breakfasts.

Unfortunately I forgot they were in the car.

My husband thought that was the funniest thing he'd ever heard. "You have to stand up for yourself and declare the Buick a Turnip Free Zone," he said and I laughed even as I considered whacking him with a rutabaga.

Kids who grew up in dysfunctional families have no idea how the dynamics in supposedly functional families play out. The games we all play in the name of love and power and turnips. There comes a time in the life of a daughter when it's easier to say, "Bring on the turnips! Load me up with Spanish Rice and curry! And how about some of that cabbage soup while you're at it?" than it is to say "Maybe next time."

And you know what? I'm glad I took those turnips. I hope my mother knew that.

[BACK TO TOP](#)

## VEGGIE FARE

### PORTOBELLO BURGERS

This recipe ushered us into the wide and wonderful world of the Portobello. I guarantee it's good enough to make you forget burgers...at least, for a little while. I discovered this one lunch time at the Marriott Marquis in Times Square. Who knew mushrooms could have so much personality?

#### ***Marinade Ingredients***

2 tablespoons rice wine vinegar

2 tablespoons lemon juice

2 tablespoons olive oil

1 clove garlic, minced

2 teaspoons dried oregano

Pinch kosher salt

Pinch sugar

Pinch black pepper, freshly grated (if at all possible)

#### ***Remaining Ingredients***

1 large clove garlic

2 tablespoons mayonnaise

2 teaspoons chopped fresh thyme

2 large Portobello mushrooms

1 red bell pepper, roasted, seeded, and peeled

2 teaspoons balsamic vinegar

2 teaspoons minced shallots

2 soft onion rolls, split and grilled

2 thick slices Monterey Jack cheese

#### ***Method***

Combine marinade ingredients. Marinate mushrooms in this mixture for 1-2 hours. Mash other garlic clove into a fine paste. Stir into mayonnaise and add thyme. On barbecue grill or under broiler, cook mushrooms 5 minutes on each side, or until soft. Sprinkle red bell pepper with

balsamic vinegar and shallots. Grill or lightly toast onion rolls. Spread mayonnaise on each half of rolls. Place grilled mushrooms on two onion roll halves, cover with roasted bell pepper, cheese and top half of rolls. Cut in half and serve hot. Makes two servings.

[BACK TO TOP](#)

\*\*\*

### **THE CAPTAIN AND TENNILLE'S MUSKRAT LOVE CASSEROLE**

I watched Toni Tennille make this dish on the Mike Douglas Show (anyone out there remember Mike Douglas?) back in 1978 and I fell instantly in love with it. I'd never heard of Spike before so I didn't know what to expect but I wasn't disappointed. This is a vegetarian's delight. Wildly flavorful, stick-to-your-ribs fare at a bargain price. Enjoy!

#### ***Ingredients***

2 onions, sliced

2 green peppers, sliced

2 red peppers, sliced

4 cloves garlic, minced

4 - 6 tomatoes, chopped very roughly

Spike (a seasoning found in supermarkets and health food stores)

Oregano

Basil

Cayenne pepper

Olive oil

Brown rice - I use the long, slow-cooking type but there's no reason why you can't take advantage of some of the quick-cooking varieties available

16 ounce can tomato sauce (maybe more, maybe less)

Mozzarella cheese (or cheddar or whatever you like)

#### ***Method***

Fair warning: this is more a series of suggestions than an actual step-by-step recipe. Brown rice has a mind of its own as you'll quickly find out when you make this.

Take out a heavy dutch oven and splash in some olive oil. When it's heated, toss in the onions and slowly sauté them until they're a deep gold. Add the green and red peppers and cook until soft. Add the garlic and cook for one minute, enjoying the wonderful aroma that's filling the room.

Now it's time to add a cup or two of brown rice to the mix. I usually go with two cups of the slow-cooking variety. Let it soak up the flavors in the pan.

Toss in the tomatoes and pop a lid on the dutch oven. Cook down the concoction until the tomatoes release their juices. Season liberally with Spike (be careful: it's salty), oregano, basil, and cayenne pepper.

Lower the heat to a simmer and add a can of tomato sauce. Cook low and slow, stirring occasionally and making sure nothing sticks or burns. You may need to add more tomato sauce along the way. Your brown rice will definitely tell you what it needs.

The whole process will take an hour or longer. Brown rice doesn't care if you're in a hurry. Brown rice marches to its own drummer. You'll need to taste from time to time to see where you are in the brown rice time-space continuum.

Once you have it where you want it, layer some delicious mozzarella on top of the mixture, slap that lid back on, and let the cheese melt into the rice.

Welcome back to the 70s!

[BACK TO TOP](#)

Let me set the scene: I'm a few days away from finishing my latest novel. I don't know what day of the week it is. I'm pretty sure it's still March but I wouldn't bet money on it. My hair is pulled back in a scraggly ponytail. I'm wearing pajama bottoms, one of my husband's old t-shirts, a fifteen year old red sweater, and bunny slippers. (Yes, bunny slippers.) My eyes haven't seen mascara in months. In fact I haven't seen daylight in months. In an attempt to keep temptation at bay I've flipped day for night and am currently living the life of a middle-aged vampire whose highlights seriously need refreshing.

Last year I wrote a book about a baker and turned to knitting for relaxation. This year I'm writing about a knitter and I've turned to baking. If I'm not knitting my way through a knotty book problem, I'm baking my way toward a solution.

This past Saturday I wrote myself into a corner. Sometimes the strangest things will stop a writer cold. Once I actually had a character trapped on the third step from the top for two weeks once because I couldn't come up with the simple words, "She climbed the stairs."

Anyway I was stumbling my way around the house Saturday afternoon muttering plot points under my breath when my husband turned the oven on to preheat and said, "Go bake something."

So I did. For some reason I have always wanted to make my own bagels. Which is probably crazy since we have three perfectly fine bagel shops within a two-mile radius of our house. I dug out my recipe from the wonderful blog [Baking and Books](#), assembled my ingredients, started a pot of water boiling, plugged in my beloved nineteen year old Kitchen Aid stand mixer, and got to work. By the time I set the dough to rise I could feel the book knots starting to untie themselves.

I worked a little on the book while the dough did its thing. I let my mind wander while I punched it down and formed it into circles. One bagel, two bagels, eight bagels, twelve bagels all ready to be dropped into a pot of boiling water, drained, then covered with poppy seeds or sesame seeds or kosher salt or whatever struck my fancy. Pop into a 500 degree oven for sixteen minutes or so (remember to turn them; you'll see by the photo that I forgot one and it got a little scorched) and start gathering compliments.





And guess what? By the time my husband and I gobbled up some fresh-from-the-oven bagels with cream cheese, I had figured my way out of the book problem and was back at work again.

Some writers go shoe shopping when they hit the wall. Some writers go for a run. Some writers even throw in the towel. Me? I bake. Not great for the waistline but it's wonderful for the imagination!

So here I am, maybe seventy-two hours away from typing *The End*. In my fictional world I have a knitter in danger, a cop trapped in a cemetery, and magic breaking out all over the place. In my real world, I have an oven preheating and the ingredients for a sour cream coffee cake on the counter.

Life is good.

[BACK TO TOP](#)

## **SWEET STUFF**

### **CHRISTMAS BROWNIES**

These are a delicious tradition in our family. Every Christmas Eve you'll find us digging into these luscious brownies, still warm from the oven, topped with vanilla ice cream. Simple, old-fashioned, and downright decadent. I found this recipe years ago in Dinah Shore's cookbook, "Someone's in the Kitchen with Dinah." (This makes two pans of brownies. Feel free to cut the recipe in half and make only one pan, although I can't imagine why you'd want to do such a thing!)

#### ***Ingredients:***

8 ounces unsweetened chocolate, melted

1 1/2 cups butter

6 eggs

3 cups sugar

1 1/2 cups flour

3 teaspoons vanilla

1 cup nuts, chopped

#### ***Method***

Beat eggs, adding sugar and vanilla. Add melted chocolate and butter. Blend until light and airy. Add flour, then nuts.

Bake in 350 degree oven in two 8 inch pans for 25-30 minutes. Don't overcook. This should be moist in the center. Of course, brownie timing is a very personal issue so follow your own taste buds. Keep checking then take the pans out when they've reached the degree of doneness that warms your heart.

[BACK TO TOP](#)

\*\*\*

### **HOMEMADE HOT FUDGE SAUCE**

Want to know my idea of heaven? A bowl of vanilla ice cream with homemade hot fudge sauce on top. It simply doesn't get any better than this.

***Ingredients:***

2 ounces unsweetened chocolate, chopped finely

2 tablespoons unsalted butter

2 tablespoons light corn syrup

3/4 cup heavy cream

1 cup sugar

2 teaspoons vanilla

1/8 teaspoon salt (optional, but believe it or not it really does enhance the flavor)

Your favorite vanilla ice cream

Walnuts, toasted and chopped, for garnish

***Method***

In a heavy saucepan melt the chocolate with the butter and the corn syrup over moderately low heat. Stirring, add the cream and the sugar, and cook the mixture, stirring, until the sugar is dissolved. Bring the mixture to a boil over moderate heat and boil it, without stirring, for 8 minutes. Remove the pan from the heat and stir in the vanilla and the salt. Scoop ice cream into four serving dishes and pour hot fudge sauce over vanilla ice cream. The sauce keeps, covered and chilled, for two weeks. (Let the sauce cool completely before covering it; any condensation will make it grainy. Reheat the sauce, uncovered, in a double boiler.)

[BACK TO TOP](#)

\*\*\*

**BLUEBERRY MUFFINS**

***Ingredients***

2 cups all-purpose flour

3/4 cups sugar

1 tablespoon baking powder

1/2 teaspoon salt

1 teaspoon cinnamon

1 stick butter, melted

1/2 cup milk

2 large eggs, beaten

1 teaspoon vanilla extract

1 1/2 cups blueberries

### ***Method***

Preheat your oven to 350 degrees. Sift together your dry ingredients (flour, sugar, baking powder, salt, cinnamon) and set aside. In a separate bowl, mix together your melted (and slightly cooled) butter, milk, eggs, and vanilla extract. Blend your wet ingredients into your dry ingredients, mixing only enough to thoroughly combine. Fold in your blueberries. (Note: frozen blueberries work beautifully in this recipe but make sure you defrost and drain them before folding into the recipe.)

Jumbo muffins? Regular? Teeny-tiny ones? It's up to you. Regular muffins take about 25 minutes to bake. The jumbo usually take about 30-35 in my oven. I haven't made the little ones yet but I'd figure on 20 minutes.

[BACK TO TOP](#)

\*\*\*



## **WONDERFUL WHEATIES CAKE aka VELVET CRUMB CAKE**

One of my most treasured possessions is my mother's recipe box. To be honest, I didn't even know she had one until after she died and it fell to me to empty cabinets and secret drawers. She had always been a seat-of-the-pants cook who created wonderful meals seemingly from divine inspiration and a sprinkling of hot peppers. But there they were, some of my favorite recipes from childhood, neatly typed up on index cards and as I looked at them, a flood of memories washed over me.

Typing the recipes was my job. I was maybe seven or eight and madly in love with the feel of a keyboard beneath my fingers. I was also a budding entrepreneur and I decided I would set myself up as Your Friendly Neighborhood Typist who would transcribe your most treasured recipes onto index cards for a nickel a pop. My mother, of course, became my number one client, followed by Aunt Betty from downstairs who also dug up her favorites for me to turn into comic book money. (I was a major Katy Keene fan who needed some bucks to subsidize her habit.)

### ***Ingredients***

1 1/3 cups Bisquick

3/4 cup sugar

3 tablespoons butter

1 egg

3/4 cup milk

1 teaspoon vanilla

### ***Topping Ingredients:***

3 tablespoons butter

1/3 cup brown sugar

2 tablespoons cream

1/2 cup Wheaties (coconut, Corn Flakes, etc.)

### ***Method***

Preheat oven to 350 degrees. Grease and flour 8" square pan. Mix Bisquick, butter, 1/4 cup milk, egg for one minute. Gradually add rest of milk and vanilla. Beat for one minute. Bake in square pan for 35-40 minutes.

Blend topping ingredients in small bowl. Spread on cooled cake. Run cake under broiler low heat until bubbly and brown. (You might try doubling the amount of topping you use for a tastier, more decadent version of our old favorite.)

[BACK TO TOP](#)

\*\*\*

## **GREAT MOLASSES SPICE COOKIES WITH ONE REALLY WEIRD INGREDIENT**

Whenever I think of Uncle Harry (who wasn't really my uncle; he was our landlord when I was growing up) I think of three things: Lititz, Pennsylvania where he was born; opera and classic music which he loved; and trips to Manhattan which always included a magical lunch at Horn & Hardart.

Although it pains me to write this, some of you might be too young to remember Horn & Hardart. And it pains me even more to realize that some of you might only know of that wonderful chain of restaurants through an old Doris Day movie but so it goes.

Now I was a tuna salad sandwich kind of girl. I lived for that moment when I slid my quarter into the slot and the little glass door opened so I could remove my treasure. But as good as that sandwich always was, nothing compared to dessert: Hermits.

See, that's the thing about memory. It can drive you crazy. Periodically I Googled "Horn & Hardart" and "Hermits" hoping against hope that The Recipe would magically appear. It never did but after much experimentation, I finally came up with a recipe a few weeks ago that comes pretty close.

### ***Ingredients:***

1/2 C butter (softened)

1/2 C shortening

(I made one batch with all butter, another batch all shortening. The all butter version was head-and-shoulders better. Big surprise, right?)

1 1/2 cups white sugar

1/2 cup unsulphured molasses

2 eggs, lightly beaten

4 cups white flour

2 1/4 teaspoons baking soda

2 1/4 teaspoons ground ginger (I prefer 3 teaspoons)

1 1/2 teaspoons ground cloves (I prefer 2 - 3 teaspoons)

1 1/2 teaspoons cinnamon (I prefer 2 - 3 teaspoons)

1/2 teaspoon salt

1 heaping teaspoons table-grind pepper (not finely ground, not super coarse) (Trust me. The pepper is the secret to the whole recipe. You can leave it out if you must but I highly recommend it.

Granulated sugar to roll cookies

### ***Method***

Preheat oven to 350 degrees.

Cream butter and shortening (or all butter or all shortening) with sugar until light and fluffy. Beat in molasses and eggs until thoroughly combined.

Slowly add salt, baking soda, ginger, cloves, cinnamon, and pepper. Gradually stir in flour and mix well. Batter will be very thick and a little stiff.

You might try adding some raisins and/or chopped walnuts. I haven't tried it yet but I'm going to.

Roll pieces of dough into 1 1/2 inch balls then roll in granulated sugar and place on ungreased cookie sheet. (I line the sheet with parchment paper.) Place them 2 1/2 inches apart on cookie sheet.

Bake for 13 minutes. Cookies will flatten out into perfect circles as they bake. They might seem a little "loose" when you remove them from the oven but don't succumb to the urge to bake them a little longer. They tighten up quite a bit as they cool and become soft and chewy and -

Sorry. I stopped to dunk one in a cup of tea.

Bake at 350 degrees for 13 minutes. They'll puff up beautifully and little cracks will form on the tops of the cookies which make them look extremely cool. (Okay, so I'm easily amused.)

Give these a try. I think you'll like them.

[BACK TO TOP](#)

\*\*\*

## **MY MOTHER'S RICE PUDDING**

I don't know what it is about this recipe but every time my mother made it, it was absolute perfection and every time I made it, it was an unqualified disaster. Let me know what happens when you make it, okay?

### ***Ingredients:***

3 eggs

2 cups whole milk

Soaked raisins

1 cup cooked rice

1/2 cup sugar

1 teaspoon (or more, to taste) vanilla

### ***Method***

Beat the eggs in a large bowl. Mix in the rest of the ingredients. Pour mixture in buttered loaf pan (Pyrex, if possible) then settle gently into a bain marie (hot water bath.) Bake in 300 degree oven for 1 hour.

[BACK TO TOP](#)

\*\*\*



## **ROSE'S SOUR CREAM COFFEE CAKE**

This simple recipe for Sour Cream Coffee Cake probably has the most personal history of any recipe in this collection. I first encountered this wonderful cake on August 25, 1968 - the day of my bridal shower. I was barely eighteen and two weeks away from marrying my high school sweetheart who was about to come home on leave from the Air Force. My best friend Danielle hosted my shower at her parents' apartment and her wonderful mother Rose made this cake.

Well, I thought I'd died and gone to baking heaven. I was eighteen years old, starry-eyed in love, and determined to become the best cook on the planet. And I was reasonably sure this cake would give me a giant push up the ladder toward my goal.

Roy and I married, right on schedule, and headed off to the wilds of Omaha, Nebraska where he was stationed. We were young, in love, and dead broke and I decided that maybe this wonderful coffee cake was our way to fame and fortune. I was so young and naïve that I believed a bakery would pay me money to bake coffee cakes in our tiny apartment kitchen. I guess you've already figured out that my Lucy Ricardo scheme didn't quite pan out (I ended up typing for a data processing firm) but my love for this cake never wavered. It quickly became our Go-To Cake for gatherings of family and friends. Every year for twenty years I made one for my Grandma El at Christmastime and every year she declared it the Best. Present. Ever.

Her daughter, my aunt Mona, presented her with beautiful clothes and perfume and all sorts of wonderful things but it was always my \$2 coffee cake that garnered the applause. One Christmas Mona gave Grandma El a beautiful color TV. Grandma El thanked her daughter politely but she didn't make a fuss.

You know what's coming, right? I handed Grandma her annual Sour Cream Coffee Cake and you would have thought I'd presented her with the winning Lotto ticket. Sometimes I wondered if she actually loved the cake that much or she enjoyed needling her daughter. (Okay, maybe a little of both!)

After Grandma died in 1989 I found her small handwritten recipe book. She had copied down my recipe for Rose's sour cream coffee cake and in the margin she wrote, "Delicious!" That about says it all.

Enjoy!

### ***Ingredients***

#### ***Cake:***

1 stick butter, room temperature

1 cup white sugar

1 teaspoon vanilla extract

1/2 teaspoons salt

1 teaspoon baking powder

1 teaspoon baking soda

2 eggs

1 cup sour cream

2 cups white flour

***Filling/Topping:***

1/2 cup white sugar

1/2 cup chopped pecans (I usually use walnuts)

1 tablespoon (or more; your choice) ground cinnamon

Preheat oven to 350 degrees. Butter and flour a bundt pan or tube pan. Set aside.

In large mixing bowl beat together butter, 1 cup white sugar, vanilla extract until light and fluffy. Add two eggs and sour cream. Beat very well. Slowly beat in 2 cups white flour, salt, baking powder, baking soda. Mixture will be very thick.

Pour half of the mixture into prepared pan. Spread evenly. Sprinkle with one half of the filling/topping mixture. Pour remaining half of the mixture into pan and spread evenly as well. Sprinkle remaining filling/topping mixture on top.

Pop into the preheated oven for 55 minutes or so. This makes a wonderful dessert but it's also great in the morning with a cup of coffee or tea. Enjoy!

[BACK TO TOP](#)

## **ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

BARBARA BRETTON is the USA Today bestselling, award-winning author of more than 50 books. She currently has over ten million copies in print around the world. Her works have been translated into twelve languages in over twenty countries and she has received starred reviews from both PUBLISHERS WEEKLY and BOOKLIST.

Barbara has been featured in articles in The New York Times, USA Today, Wall Street Journal, Romantic Times, Cleveland Plain Dealer, Herald News, Home News, Somerset Gazette,,among others, and has been interviewed by Independent Network News Television, appeared on the Susan Stamberg Show on NPR, and been featured in an interview with Charles Osgood of WCBS, among others.

Her awards include both Reviewer's Choice and Career Achievement Awards from Romantic Times; a RITA nomination from RWA, Gold and Silver certificates from Affaire de Coeur; the RWA Region 1 Golden Leaf; and several sales awards from Bookrak. Ms. Bretton was included in a recent edition of Contemporary Authors.

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[BACK TO TOP](#)

###