

COOK LIKE A WRITER

by The Book Posse

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DEDICATION

This book is dedicated to all readers, bloggers, reviewers who enjoy authors who are changing the world one word at a time.

In the Book Posse's case, we are helping to change the world one recipe at a time as well.

To having fun in the kitchen and to good health.

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Digital ISBN: 9781301547210

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PROLOGUE - APPETIZERS, SALADS, SOUPS

Appetizers

A Fig & Some Goat Cheese Makes Your Taste Buds Sing by Selena Robins

When we were in Italy, we had the pleasure of eating fresh figs right off the tree. Alone they are delicious, but add some cheese, nuts and other ingredients and all those different flavors work wonderfully together for a delectable appetizer to enjoy with a glass of wine.

Ingredients:

8 ripe figs
2 TBSP extra-virgin olive oil
1 TBSP Balsamic vinegar
1/2 cup soft goat cheese
1/3 cup honey
1 TBSP finely chopped fresh rosemary leaves
1/2 cup pine nuts

Alternates: You can also use: sharp feta cheese or provolone. You can also substitute walnuts for the pine nuts.

Directions:

Preheat the oven to 400 degrees F.

In a bowl, mix the oil, vinegar and honey together.

In another bowl, mix the cheese and nuts together.

With a sharp knife, trim the rough portion of the fig's stem.

Slice down through the stem of each fig (about 3/4-inch) then make a second cut so that you have an X-shaped cut in the top of each fig.

Rub each fig all over with the oil-vinegar-honey mixture.

With the tip of your knife, gently open the edges of each fig apart and stuff each fig one teaspoon of the cheese-nut mixture.

Place the figs upright on a baking sheet and bake for about 10 minutes or until the figs are plump but have not burst.

Remove from oven and sprinkle a pinch of the chopped rosemary on each fig.

You can also drizzle a bit more honey on each one if desired. Serve immediately.

Amazing Deep Fried Pepperoni by Nancy Lauzon

This sinful and crispy munchie appeared on my blog—in the virtual sense, of course—during last spring's launch of my fourth novel, *A Few Dead Men – a Chick Dick Mystery*. Deep Fried Pepperoni is a Halifax delicacy from Nova Scotia, Canada. Yes, it's true, Haligonians have a thing for deep-fried, unhealthy things, bless their little hearts. Deep Fried Pepperoni should always be served with sweet honey mustard dipping sauce (recipe below) and an ice cold beer.

Ingredients:

Pepperoni

Honey (about ¼ cup)

Mustard (about ¼ cup)

Directions:

Use as much pepperoni as you want, it really doesn't matter. If you buy it from the deli counter at the grocery store, you can buy smaller amounts and don't have to buy an entire package. If

you are feeding a crowd (and live on the Canadian east coast, where they're available) buy a large roll of pepperoni.

Slice the pepperoni about ¼ inch thick, on an angle. Heat about an inch of vegetable oil in the bottom of a tall pot or wok. Make sure the oil is hot and ready to go before you start frying. Test by dropping one piece of the pepperoni in. If it starts frying right away, add the rest, if it doesn't and it kind of sinks to the bottom or floats around a bit, wait a little longer.

Fry the pepperoni for about 60 – 90 seconds. Stand over the pot and watch it or you may burn your kitchen down. Use a metal slotted spoon to retrieve the pepperoni from the pot. Don't overcrowd the pot. If you are making a lot of pepperoni, fry it in batches. Pat the pepperoni dry with paper towel to absorb excess grease and serve immediately with the honey mustard.

Honey Mustard

Whisk together equal parts honey and mustard in a bowl until well combined. Taste it. If you find it is too sweet add more mustard, if you find it is not sweet enough add more honey. Duh. Chill in the fridge until ready to serve with the pepperoni. If you don't want to make this, you can buy honey mustard dipping sauces at most grocery stores.

Authentic Polpetta (Meatballs) by Selena Robins

When people think of meatballs, they think, spaghetti and meatballs, and that's good too, however, meatballs can make a great prologue to your novel dinner party (loving the play on words for this cookbook).

Whether you serve them with your favorite tomato sauce, or (Italians please turn your head when you read the following dipping suggestions) serve them with a sweet and sour sauce or barbeque sauce, they will be a huge hit as appetizers.

Polpettes as they are called in Italy, are one of those recipes where Italian families will claim theirs is the best recipe and the only way to make them. There are a variety of ways to make these mouthwatering, little balls, however, I will say that my version of polpettes (a recipe handed down from my mother which was handed down from her mother in Italy) is one of the more delectable ways of producing a yummylicious meatball.

The secret to excellent meatballs is for them to be moist on the inside (you get the moistness by adding milk and bread as I will show you below) and golden brown on the outside with a bit of bite, so that you get a variety of textures, teasing your taste buds.

Ingredients:

- 1 pound medium lean ground beef
- 1 pound lean ground pork
- 1 pound lean ground veal
- 1 cup milk
- 1 baguette (best to use a few days old bread, best if it is hardened, remove the crust)
- 1/4 cup Romano cheese (freshly grated)
- 1/4 cup grated Parmesan (freshly grated)
- 3 TBSP Italian parsley (chopped)
- 2 eggs – (lightly beaten)
- 4 egg whites – (lightly beaten)
- 2 tsp. Kosher salt
- 2 tsp. black pepper

Directions:

Tear the baguette in small pieces. You can chop it up in a food processor if you like.

In a small pot, heat the milk, stirring constantly, until the milk is steamy.

Turn off the heat and remove pot from the stove.

Add the bread to the milk and let it soak, until all the milk is dissolved in the bread.

Mash it until the bread and milk resembles a paste.

Let the bread paste cool.

In a large bowl, combine the following: beef, pork, veal, Parmesan and Romano cheeses, eggs, egg whites, salt, parsley, black pepper, garlic and the bread-milk mixture.

Mix everything well with your hands. Try not to work the mixture too hard and for too long, as you don't want the mixture to be too tough. You just want to work it so that all the ingredients are well blended.

Roll one meatball and if you find the mixture is a bit too wet, then add a bit more cheese (or some breadcrumbs).

If you find the mixture a bit too dry, add more egg whites.

You will be able to tell if everything is just right, by rolling one ball, and if it all stays together in a ball, then you don't have to add anything extra.

Preheat oven to 400 F.

Prepare a baking sheet either by spraying a non-stick spray or lining it with parchment paper.

You can roll the meatballs any size you like. A good size for serving with a main dish (like pasta) is between two to three inches, however, for an appetizer, you can go smaller if you wish.

Place the meatballs on the baking sheet and bake until fully cooked through (about 15 minutes). The length of time that they need to be baked will depend on the size you are rolling the meatballs.

Alternative: If you'd like to add sweetness to your meatballs (again, F.B.I.'s – Full Blooded Italians, please do not read this part) you can toss in a handful of currants into your mixture. Makes for a sweet and savory appetizer.

Baked Pita Chips by A. Catherine Noon

I know, you can buy these by the bag. But they're super pricey and they're amazing when you make them in your very own oven. The first time I made these for a party they were the single most popular item. (Weird, I know; me, I go for the chocolate, but hey?)

They're super easy to make, too, and inexpensive. Go buy yourself a dozen 7 or 8 inch flour tortillas.

Now, a word of caution here. Go to the Mexican grocery, if you can, and if not, buy a brand made by someone who has a Mexican name. "Bob's Tortillas?" Right. Unless it's Roberto, I'm gonna take a wild guess and say that "Bob" is some guy in Montana who thinks he can make Mexican food because he saw it on the Food Network. No offense to cross-cultural cuisine, but real flour tortillas are malleable, smell like flour, and taste like food. Bad ones are cold, break easily, usually stale, and smell like starch. Blarg.

Cut each tortilla into 8 wedges. (HINT: if you're not geometrically adept, like, say, Aunt Noony, that means: cut in half. Cross that half. Then cross those halves 2 more times, like you're cutting a pie.) (If you are geometrically adept, good for you. Go to the head of the class and leave me alone to cook.)

Spread the wedges in your baking pan or baking sheet. I use my cookie sheets. Bake on 350 degrees F (177 C) for 5 to 10 minutes until dry and crisp.

You can store in an airtight container for about 4 days at room temperature. You can freeze them for up to 3 weeks, but I don't recommend it. Honestly, they're best hot and right out of the oven; if you can manage it, do it the day of the party if you have the room in the oven.

BONUS POINTS: Brush melted butter on the tortillas before cutting them, then sprinkle cake spice and sugar (or cinnamon and sugar) on them. (To make, combine ½ C sugar with 1 or 2 t of cinnamon or cake spice.) Then cut into wedges and bake. You might want to stand out of the way of the stampede of folks wanting to eat them, though.

Don't say I didn't warn you.

Catch Me in Castile Spanish Tortilla by Kimberley Troutte

Once a long time ago, a young bride and her handsome groom went on a trip to Spain. As they explored the ancient castles, the bride was swept away by the romance and the beauty. There was so much history right there at her fingertips. She ventured outside the thick castle walls and at her feet were bits and pieces of pearly-white bones. Wondering what kind of bones these were, she picked up a few and carried them to the tour guide.

"Excuse me? What animal?" the bride asked in her halting Spanish.

"Human," was the guide's shocking answer.

The bride nearly swallowed her tongue. As she grappled with what to do with parts of PEOPLE—no matter how much she wanted to, she couldn't drop them, or toss them as far as she could throw them, could she?—the guide explained that in olden days the dead were tossed over the castle walls. She must have picked up bones from one of those bodies.

As she scrubbed her hands clean, a bold plot bunny bounced into her brain and the novel, *Catch Me in Castile* was born. Oh, and the young bride lived happily ever after and now writes Romance novels.

Tortilla Española (Spanish Omelet)

Ingredients:

6-7 medium potatoes, peeled

1 whole yellow onion

5-6 large eggs

2-3 cups of olive oil for pan frying

Salt to taste

Diced ham, chorizo, red or green peppers, or tomatoes can also be added.

Slice the potatoes into 1/8" slices. Chop onions into 1/4" pieces. Mix potatoes, onion and salt. In a large non-stick pan heat the olive oil on medium-high. When the oil is ready for frying, spread the potatoes and onions evenly over the surface. Cook until potatoes are done then remove mixture from the oil with a slotted spoon. Whisk eggs in a large bowl and add the potato-onion mixture. Pour 1-2 tbsp. of olive oil into a non-stick frying pan. Heat on medium. Stir the potato-onion-egg mixture once more and pour into heated oil. Spread evenly. When the eggs have cooked around the edges, carefully lift one side of the omelet and peek. When the bottom is brown, put a plate on top of the pan and flip the omelet over onto the plate and slide back into the pan to cook for 3-4 minutes. Turn off the heat and let sit for 2 minutes. Slide the omelet onto a plate and cut into 1 1/2" squares.

Serve with a sliced baguette.

Crunchy Spicy Chickpeas by Selena Robins

I love salty snacks and one of my weaknesses is potato chips. As Shakira sings, "Hips don't lie," she's talking about those of us whose penchant for potato chips makes our hips tell the truth. So I stay away from the chippy hip-extending carbs and instead look for ways to satisfy my salty cravings with healthy snacks.

Chickpeas are chock full of healthy protein, low in carbs and fit right into any healthy diet plan. Plus, they make a delicious addition to an appetizer buffet.

Ingredients:

2 TBSP extra-virgin olive oil

1/2 tsp. chili powder

2 tsp. roasted garlic (or 1 tsp garlic powder)

1 tsp. sea salt
1/2 tsp. crushed red pepper
1 can chickpeas (drained and washed)

Directions:

Preheat an oven to 350 degrees F

In a bowl add: oil, garlic, chili powder, red pepper, salt and whisk everything well together.

Add the chickpeas and toss to coat.

Spray a baking sheet with non-stick spray or use parchment paper.

Spread the chickpeas into a single layer on a baking sheet.

Roast for 25 minutes, then turn the chickpeas and continue roasting for 20 minutes, until nicely browned and slightly crispy.

Alternative: If you like a little sweet with your salt and spice, drizzle some honey over the chickpeas while they are hot.

Easy Vegetable Squares by Nancy Lauzon

My daughter came upon this recipe, and these appies have become a favorite at our family parties, showers and get-togethers. They can be made ahead of time, and make a nice contrast to heated appetizers, since they're served at room temperature.

Ingredients:

2 pkgs of Pillsbury Crescent Rolls
1 (8oz.) pkg. of cream cheese
1/3 cup of mayo
1 tsp. dill
1 tsp. of powdered salad dressing mix (Ranch, Italian or your favorite kind)
1 cup finely chopped carrots
1 cup finely chopped broccoli

1 cup finely chopped cauliflower
1 cup of shredded cheddar cheese (or a blend of cheeses)

Directions:

Open Pillsbury Crescent Roll packages and roll onto cookie sheet so that they are one large rectangular piece. Pinch all the "seams" of the triangles together so that the corners don't curl up when baking.

Bake according to directions. Cool and set aside.

Meanwhile, with electric mixer, blend cream cheese, dill, mayo and salad dressing mix. Spread onto cooled crust.

Top with vegetables and then sprinkle on cheese. Cut into squares using pizza cutter. Enjoy!

Fun Fabulous Focaccia Feast by Selena Robins

Try saying the title to this recipe real fast.

My journey to the best Focaccia (pronounced—foh/KAHT/tchah) of my life was a ten hour flight, a two hour car ride and an hour donkey ride uphill all the way.

Okay, I'm joking about the donkey part. However, I assume that back in the day they did ride donkeys to get to the tiny Trattoria in Italy, complete with wobbly wooden tables, checkered table cloths, hunks of provolone cheese and dried sausages hanging from the ceiling and an authentic Nonna dressed all in black, serving homemade red wine in stemless glasses and the tastiest Focaccia bread in the world.

Focaccia is a flat Italian bread made with olive oil and herbs and topped with minimal ingredients.

It is unlike pizza, as pizza can be piled high with five or more toppings and lots of cheese (the lots of cheese part is the North American version of pizza).

Focaccia is best eaten with minimal toppings so you can savor the flavor of the oil and bread.

While baking this bread your kitchen will smell heavenly and you'll want to put on some romantic soothing music and pour yourself a glass of wine.

Cooking is all about having fun and giving all your senses a culinary, orgasmic workout.

Basic Focaccia Dough Recipe

Ingredients:

1 tsp. honey
1 package active dry yeast (.25 ounce)
1 cup warm water
1 medium potato (peeled, boiled and mashed)
1 1/2 cup all-purpose flour
1/2 cup whole wheat flour
4 TBSP fresh rosemary
3 TBSP olive oil (good quality extra virgin olive oil is best to use)
1/2 tsp. salt

Directions:

In a small bowl, dissolve honey and yeast in 1/3 cup of the warm water until it looks creamy.

Put a cloth over the bowl and let stand for about 10 minutes.

In a large bowl add: flour and salt mix together.

Add the yeast mixture to the flour bowl; stir well to combine.

Add the mashed potato and rosemary and work into the dough, and then add one tablespoon at a time of the warm water, until all of the flour is absorbed.

When the dough is pliable and it's not too wet and not too dry it's ready to be kneaded. Adding the water one tablespoon at a time, will ensure you don't make the dough too wet, turn it out onto a lightly floured surface.

Knead for 2 to 3 minutes.

Lightly oil a large bowl.

Place the dough in the bowl and turn to coat the dough with oil.

Cover the bowl with a damp cloth and let rise in a warm place until doubled in volume. Takes about 30 to 40 minutes.

Preheat oven to 475 degrees F.

Take the dough out of the bowl and turn it out onto a lightly floured surface; knead briefly.

Pat or roll the dough on to a lightly greased baking sheet. (You could also use a baking sheet lined with parchment paper)

Brush the dough with extra-virgin olive oil and sprinkle lightly with sea-salt.

Using your thumbs, press into the dough so there are little thumb print-like marks on the dough.

Bake Focaccia in preheated oven for 10 to 20 minutes. Depends on how crispy you want the bread.

Suggested Focaccia Toppings: (Put your toppings on before you bake the bread)

This is where you let your culinary imagination go wild and sexy.

Suggestion: Take one topping from each section to top your bread. You may also choose to not add any cheese, your choice, just try not to put a lot of toppings on the bread.

Suggested Focaccia Cheese: (Choose one cheese)

crumbled feta cheese

thinly sliced provolone cheese

shredded Parmesan cheese

diced goat cheese

shredded mozzarella cheese

crumbled blue cheese

Suggested Focaccia Topping: (Choose no more than 3 toppings)

coarsely chopped pitted kalamata olives
sun-dried tomato packed in oil
thinly sliced red onions
very thinly sliced potatoes
thinly sliced sweet onions
roasted garlic
chopped onion
chopped hazelnuts
Serrano ham
chopped chorizo
roasted sweet peppers
slice mushrooms (any kind of mushrooms)
anchovies
roasted pine nuts

Suggested Focaccia Herb: (Choose one herb)

rosemary
basil
oregano
thyme
chives

Guacamole A La Menlo Park by A. Catherine Noon

As a Californian, I have strong opinions about avocados in general and guacamole in particular. The green crap you get at the grocery store is NOT guacamole. The stuff that looks like green whipped cream that you get at the restaurant that serves American food but has a Mexican entrée or two is NOT guacamole. If it's not fresh, and doesn't have—hello—fresh avocados in it—IT'S NOT GUACAMOLE!

I've been subjected to my share of guacamole. I love it so much, I've been known to eat it with a fork, especially since wheat and I no longer have a smooth relationship. My favorite guacamole

is in the kitchen of my great friend and soul-sister, Dorothy. She makes it fresh with just the right amount of tomato and cilantro.

But here, without further ado, I will share with you my super-sekrit recipe for Guacamole a la Menlo Park. And if you don't know where Menlo Park is, Google it.

This recipe makes 2 cups of dip, which sounds like a lot, but is really only enough for feeding maybe 4 people. (I know, I know, serving size is like what, a teaspoon? Come on. Be realistic.) If you're making it for a large party, double or triple the batch. Trust me, I learned the hard way that everyone either wishes they want more, or complains they didn't get any. And I'm mean; I wouldn't give out the recipe to just anyone. So consider yourselves lucky that Aunt Noony is in a good mood. Guacamole. Food of the Gods.

2 medium, very ripe avocados

If you buy them and they feel like hand grenades, don't despair. Put them in a paper bag on your counter to ripen. CAUTION: this doesn't take very long, maybe 2 or 3 days, so don't leave them there for a week and expect to have something edible still in the bag.

If you've never prepared a fresh one, you can find instructions for pitting it on You Tube. It's not hard. Cut around the pit in the center, (it's about an inch and a half in diameter), cutting the avocado in half. Twist the halves apart and they'll separate, one without the pit and one with. With a sharp cook's knife, tap the pit with the blade so it bites into it. Turn the knife while holding the avocado; the pit will come loose, still attached to the knife. Use caution; the pit is very oily. Discard the pit or suspend over a glass with the end in the water to have it grow roots. (My mom did this with practically every avocado we ever had but was never successful in actually growing an avocado tree.)

One half of a small onion, chopped. (If you like onion, use the whole thing; I recommend using Maui onions if you can find them.)

1 T snipped fresh cilantro (you can find this in the salad section of the grocery store or at a farmer's market)

1 T lemon or lime juice (It's best if you get it from a, you know, FRUIT?? Meaning, don't use bottled if you can get fresh. It tastes much better.)

1 clove garlic, finely minced or put through a garlic press

salt

Use enough salt, or salt to taste. If you don't have a good gut-feel for how much that is, figure ½ t to start and go from there.

One large tomato or two Roma tomatoes, chopped

Put the avocado in your mixing bowl and, using two forks, mash it into small pieces. I prefer to chew my guacamole, and not spoon it on like green paste; if you prefer the smooth variety you can just throw everything in your blender and whirl on high. If not, then finish mashing your avocado, then add the chopped onion, chopped cilantro, lemon or lime juice, and garlic. Stir with a large fork and make sure everything mashes together with the avocado. Then add the tomato and stir some more.

You can serve it immediately or cover tightly with either plastic wrap or put into a sealed container. It may brown a tiny bit (the citrus juice will prevent a lot of the browning); if that happens, just take off the lid and stir before serving. The brown doesn't mean it's gone bad, it just means the avocados oxidize like bananas do.

If you manage to get to the party without eating it all first, then you can put it into a nice serving bowl and serve with vegies, chips, or tortillas. (It's really good with jicama.) Yum!

Happy Trails Trail Mix by Nancy Lauzon

If you have ever been a Nancy Drew fan, chances are you've dreamed of following in her footsteps. The members of the Nancy Drew Sleuths manage to fulfill that dream every year during the annual Nancy Drew Sleuths Conference. New members are always welcome, so check us out.

Last year the Sleuth Con took place in Arizona, where we retraced Nancy's adventures in the book *The Secret of Shadow Ranch*—also set in Arizona.

Sleuth Cons involve lots of touring around looking for collectible books, listening to interesting speakers and sleuthing activities involving mystery and mayhem. We really work up an appetite.

Here's the recipe for a fabulous snack that was included in our conference packs, and it's amazing.

Ingredients:

Quaker Oatmeal Squares
Honey Nut Chex OR Golden Grahams
Honey Bunches of Oats—Just Bunches (comes without the flakes)
Peanuts
Dried Cherries
Golden Raisins
Mini M&Ms
Snyder's Peanut Butter Pretzel Sandwiches

Directions:

Mix the above ingredients in whatever quantities you prefer and enjoy, pardner!

Hummus and Tabouli by A. Catherine Noon

One of my favorite recipes for last-minute guests or party preparation is Hummus and Tabouli. You know that moment when your stomach falls to your shoes and you realize that, while you did get showered and dressed and the gift wrapped and the directions printed out, you forgot to pack something to bring for the potluck? Or you have someone come over whom you'd like to feed and you realize you haven't prepared anything in advance? Yup. That moment.

You could go all-out and make hummus from scratch. It's not hard. You simply throw some chickpeas and olive oil (or white beans if you're feeling gourmet) into a blender and whirl with your favorite herbs (I like garlic and cilantro), or you could go easy on yourself and pick up some hummus at the store.

A word of caution here—all hummuses... hummi?... are not alike. You might want to check around and taste-test a couple different brands before you settle on one you love. My favorite store-bought brand is Cedar's, at <http://www.cedarfoods.com>. They spell their Hummus "Hommus," and they put all sorts of yummy things in it—their artichoke and Kalamata olive hummus is to die for.

So, now you have your hummus. The next thing to add is the Tabouli. For those of you who haven't had the chance to indulge in this treat, Tabouli is a Mediterranean salad made with bulgur wheat, tomatoes, parsley, mint, and onion, with a dressing of olive oil, lemon and salt. It's one of the only ways I've found it possible to eat parsley, which is not one of my favorite tastes. Throw it together with the other ingredients, though, and it's a serious yum – plus, parsley is super good for you, so double win.

To be honest with you, I've never made Tabouli (also spelled Tabbouleh) from scratch. You certainly could, but I like Cedar's so much (who, typically, spell it yet another way, "Taboule"), I just get theirs. The key here is that you get the same size container of each and then the magic happens. Mix them together!

Yup, it really is that simple. In fact, you can buy the stuff at the store on the way to the party, along with some fancy chips for dipping, and you'll look like a hero even though it was last minute. Even better? It's a super-charged healthy snack that will feed your friends well in addition to being tasty. What could be better?

Mom's Stuffed Mushrooms by Kimberley Troutte

When I told my mom that I was writing a cook book she had the good grace not to chuckle. A little secret? I am not the best cook in the family. Not even close. My mom and sis are phenomenal in the kitchen. Seriously, they could make a living with the creations they make. When I humbly asked Mom if she had any recipes to share for the cookbook, she provided one that was a hit with her Mahjong group.

I give you Mom's Stuffed Mushrooms.

Ingredients:

1 lb. large mushrooms
3 sliced green onions
1/4 cup butter (or margarine)
1/2 cup fine bread crumbs
1 tablespoon parsley
1 tablespoon lemon juice
1/4 tsp salt

Directions:

Remove stems from mushrooms. Dice stems and sauté with green onions in butter. Add bread crumbs and remaining ingredients. Fill mushrooms and place on a cookie sheet. Bake in 450 degree oven for 10 - 12 minutes.

Naughty Barbeque Nachos by Denise Agnew

Oh, yeah! As far as I'm concerned these are the definitive nachos, and the only ones I make at home. Rest assured that even if you leave out the green onions and olives in the recipe it'll still be good stuff! I also sometimes cheat and put more cheese in the mixture and on top when it's done baking.

Ingredients:

1 16oz can fat free refried beans (Veggiesaurus people can sub with vegetarian.)
1 ½ cup shredded cheddar cheese or combo of Mexican cheeses
½ cup reduced sugar barbeque sauce
1 lb. ground turkey (I sometimes use hamburger. It's your choice.)
½ cup chopped onion
½ cup salsa or picante
Sliced black olives
Sliced green onions
Chopped tomatoes

Directions:

Cook meat and onion in a skillet until done. Drain if necessary. In a mixing bowl combine beans, one cup cheese and barbeque sauce. Stir meat into bean mixture. Spread mixture in an ovenproof platter or baking dish such as a deep pie dish. Bake at 350 degrees for 25 minutes. Top with salsa, remaining ½ cheese, tomatoes, olives and green onions.

Salsa Tales from an Erotic Garden by Selena Robins

This recipe was inspired by the vegetables in our garden. Our once innocent garden has turned into an erotic topic of conversation between me and my husband.

It all started when my husband pointed out how long our cucumbers were getting, and for some reason (which only a therapist could answer) I couldn't stop the innuendos about cucumber size, plum tomatoes and the shape of our zucchinis.

One weekend as we browsed through the local farmer's market, I picked up a long cucumber and yelled over to my hubby, "Honey, this isn't nearly as big as yours." (Of course, I emphasized the word yours).

He shook his head when a few people laughed and he said, “This is my cross to bear, but I love her.”

I can’t stop with the cucumber innuendos. I need therapy.

Speaking of therapy; for me writing and cooking give me all the mental-help I need (I know some would argue this point, but some people don’t have characters occupying a ton of space in their heads).

This salsa is a refreshing prologue to any meal or can be served as an appetizer when you have a few friends over for a drink.

It will also help keep your thighs and hips happily slim as it is loaded with low calorie fruits and vegetables.

Cucumber, Tomato, Mango, Peach Salsa

Ingredients:

3 ripe mango, peeled and diced
2 ripe peaches, peeled and diced
1 large English cucumber, diced in small pieces
4 fresh plum tomatoes, chopped in small pieces
3 Tbsp fresh parsley leaves, chopped – (I don’t have a good relationship with cilantro, so I use parsley, however if you’re on speaking terms with cilantro you can substitute it for the parsley)
juice of 1 fresh lime
1 red bell pepper, chopped in small pieces
1 yellow bell pepper, chopped in small pieces
2 jalapeno peppers, seeded and finely chopped – (leave the seeds in if you like the salsa spicy)
1 clove garlic, minced
Kosher salt and black cracked pepper to taste

Directions:

Mix everything together in a bowl, cover and let sit for a few hours.

Serve with gluten-free, low-salt nacho chips or cucumber slices.

Stick Around for Pot Stickers by Kimberley Troutte

My twelve-year-old boy ate pot stickers at a Chinese restaurant and decided to try and make them at home. He found a recipe online that we tailored to our own liking. I helped and we made gorgeous pot stickers. He was very proud. Placing the pot stickers on one of our fancy plates, he spread them out like a culinary rainbow to serve to the family. Before I had a chance to grab the camera, they were devoured. (I admit, I had a few myself and they were yummy.) Shucks, I guess we'll have to make them again.

Ingredients:

½ pound ground pork, or other meat (we used turkey. Tofu can be substituted for meat)
¼ cup minced scallion
1 cup bok choy, chopped finely
1 teaspoon each, ground ginger, rice wine, sugar
1 tablespoon each, soy sauce and sesame oil
1 egg, lightly beaten
1 teaspoon freshly ground black pepper
24 round Egg Roll Wrappers or Wonton Skins

Directions:

Cook the meat. Turn off the heat and combine all ingredients except the wrappers in the pan and mix to make the pot sticker filling. Put about 2 teaspoons of the filling in the center of a wrapper, then moisten the edge of the wrapper with water and fold over to form a semicircle. Press the seam tightly to seal completely. Lightly oil a steamer to prevent sticking. Steam the pot stickers in one or two batches for about 10 minutes per batch.

Serve with a small cup of soy sauce (we mix in a little ginger and pepper) for dipping.

Sweet & Sassy Oriental Chicken Wings by Renee Wildes

This is a good one for any gathering—who doesn't love CHICKEN WINGS? We have for any number of occasions, from family holidays to Super Bowl parties. I'm probably the only Redskins fan in Green Bay Packer country (surprising I don't have a target on my back!), and we finally got into the first round of the 2013 playoffs—after HOW many years??? But I still might make them for the big game, no matter who's playing.

Ingredients:

4 lbs. chicken wings
1 cup soy sauce
1 cup white sugar
¼ cup vegetable oil
¼ cup pineapple juice
1 tsp. ginger
1 tsp. garlic salt

Directions:

Place chicken wings in NON-METAL baking pan. Wisk all the other ingredients together and pour over chicken. Refrigerate for 12 hours.

Heat oven to 350. Pull wings from marinade and bake COVERED in a 9 x 13 pan for 30 minutes. Uncover, brush with marinade & bake an additional 30 minutes.

The above makes for a crispy, glazed chicken wing. Can also be put in a crockpot on low for 8 hours for fall-off-the-bone tender.

Three Cheese Bacon Spread by Denise Agnew

When I first heard about this spread, I was dubious. Cheese and bacon spread. Hmmm. But it's really good, and like many of the recipes in my section of the cookbook, you can alter and skip some ingredients if they don't work for you.

Ingredients:

4 oz low fat cream cheese (fat free if you prefer, but I actually don't like the taste with fat free)
½ cup shredded reduced-fat Cheddar cheese
1 tablespoon grated Parmesan cheese
2 tablespoons skim or 1% milk
1/8 teaspoon paprika
dash pepper
2 tablespoons real bacon bits or two slices turkey bacon crumbled

2 medium green onions thinly sliced
Your choice of whole grain crackers

Directions:

In a bowl cream together cheeses, milk, paprika, pepper with electric mixer until smooth. Stir in bacon bits and onions until blended. Serve with crackers! How simple is that?

Totally Hot Stuffed Chili by Kimberley Troutte

My friends own the Kalyra Winery in Santa Ynez, California. It is a beautiful and unusual place that you need to visit to truly appreciate. I was thrilled to have my first book release party on the patio and grassy knoll at the winery. The pictures were gorgeous. And the wine! My friends make some of the best wines I've ever tasted.

What's amazing is that the winemaker is also a good cook. I went to a bar-b-que where he served stuffed chili peppers that were so yummy that I wanted to try making them at home. The hardest part was finding the best chili peppers for the recipe. To me, Anaheims are perfect. They are not as hot as jalapeños and have a great robust flavor.

Ingredients:

6 fresh Anaheim peppers (or chilies of your choice)
package of buffalo mozzarella cheese

Directions:

Wash and dry the chilies. Place chilies on preheated grill and turn every minute for 5 to 10 minutes until chili is roughly 60% charred. Using tongs so as not to burn yourself, place chilies in a sealed plastic bag for 10-15 minutes. This will steam the chili further and make it easier to remove the skin. Peel the skins off.

Slice the chilies lengthwise down the middle to make a pocket. Stuff the pocket with cheese. Seal the stuffed chili with a couple of tooth picks and cook on the grill or in a preheated 425 oven for 10 minutes until the cheese is completely melted.

Serves 6.

Salads

Absolutely the Best Taco Salad Ever by Denise Agnew

Before this recipe I was never overly impressed with taco salads. A major reason I love this recipe is that it doesn't use pre-made taco seasoning which can be very salty (although I have cheated and used taco seasoning in a pinch, especially if I find the lower sodium non-MSG type). There's an unusual ingredient in this salad you'd never suspect unless someone told you it was in the salad.

Ingredients:

1 lb lean ground beef or ground turkey
¼ to ½ cup chopped onion (substitute with equivalent amount of powdered onion if needed)
1 teaspoon chili powder
¼ teaspoon cumin
¼ teaspoon dried oregano
1 can kidney beans (low sodium is best), drained and rinsed
1 medium tomato, chopped
1 tablespoon Russian dressing
lettuce
salsa or picante
low-fat sour cream or yogurt
guacamole

Directions:

Combine beef, onion, chili powder, cumin, and oregano in skillet and cook over medium heat until cooked thoroughly. Add beans and Russian dressing, mix and heat through. Arrange lettuce on plate or in bowl. Top with bean/meat mixture and garnish with tomatoes, yogurt/sour cream, salsa and guacamole. Of course, the toppings are to taste, so if you hate one of the toppings, don't use it.

Did you guess the secret squirrel ingredient? Yep, that Russian dressing really gives this recipe a great flavor. If you somehow get a craving one day for this salad and don't have the Russian dressing on hand, go ahead and make it. You'll probably need extra salsa or picante, but it still tastes great.

Angelic Heavenly Egg Salad by Denise Agnew

I love this egg salad in a sandwich, but it's also lovely just on its own.

Ingredients:

6 eggs

¼ cup mayonnaise (I use Miracle Whip rather than actual mayo...sue me.)

1 teaspoon Dijon mustard

½ teaspoon prepared yellow mustard

½ lemon, juiced

¼ cup chopped green onions

salt and pepper to taste

Directions:

Place eggs in saucepan and cover with cold water. Bring to a boil and remove heat. Cover and let eggs sit in hot water for 10 to 12 minutes. Remove from hot water, cool and peel. In a bowl stir together mayo, Dijon mustard, yellow mustard, lemon juice and green onions. Chop eggs into desired size chunks and mix gently into the dressing. Season with salt and pepper to taste.

Heavenly perfection!

I Hate Making Salad!' Layered Salad by Nancy Lauzon

“What can I bring?” you ask your friend who has just invited you to their backyard BBQ.

“Bring a salad.”

You dread hearing those words, because you hate making salads. You can't just throw something together from your pantry at the last minute. You have to go to the store for fresh ingredients. Then there's the chopping, slicing and dicing. Not to mention the dressing. From the bottle? Homemade? And you can't add dressing ahead of time. You have to make yourself available during the BBQ at just the right moment to dress the salad, toss the salad ... ARGH! So much pressure! You begin to resent your stupid friend for asking you to bring a salad. You wished she'd asked for a bag of chips or hamburger buns. How could she do this to you?

If this stressful scenario sounds familiar, fret not—your worries are over! This salad recipe can be made ahead of time, dressing and all, allowing you to relax and enjoy the party!

Ingredients:

1 head lettuce (iceberg), torn into bite-size pieces
½ cup chopped red onion
1 stalk celery, chopped
1 small green pepper, chopped
1 small package frozen peas
1 cup mayonnaise
2 Tbsp. sugar
2 cups shredded Cheddar cheese
½ cup bacon bits

Directions:

In large bowl—preferably glass or clear plastic—layer lettuce and onion. Spoon ½ cup mayonnaise evenly over top. Layer celery, green pepper and frozen peas; spread with remaining mayonnaise. Sprinkle sugar, cheese, and bacon on top. Cover and refrigerate at least 8 hours.

Serves 10 to 12.

Is That A Faucet In My Salad? by A. Catherine Noon

I'm surprised, nay, stunned, by the number of people here in the Midwest who have absolutely no clue how to make a good salad. I had thought, being raised in California, that salads are like French fries—solid gold American food that everyone knows how to make. Not so. Sad days.

So. Here is my remedy for that situation. It's not, precisely, a recipe, for the simple fact that the art and science of making a decent salad depend on two things: what's in season, and how to find it.

For those of you who don't get the analogy of a faucet in a salad, it refers to the phrase, "everything but the kitchen sink." It implies that you threw everything in the kitchen into the dish, except for, well, you get it. The salad is the same thing.

Let us begin with the basics and define what a salad is NOT:

1. A salad does not contain Iceberg lettuce. Iceberg lettuce uses up more vitamins than it gives you, has no taste nor nutritive value, and should never be consumed. Ever.
2. A salad is not lettuce, a tomato or two, and dressing. That's like cooking a filet mignon in the microwave.
3. A salad is not what food eats, thank you very much to the carnivores among you including, thank you very much, my husband.
4. A salad can be an entrée.
5. Sadly, those things called salads sold at the fancy yuppie restaurants in urban and suburban areas are little more than calorie vehicles. You must be very careful of the "bleu cheese, bacon and candied walnut" variety of salad. Those things have more than 1,000 calories! Holy Jeebus, people! Watch out for so-called "healthy food" that isn't. It's much better to make your own salad; cheaper too.

So. How do you make a good salad?

Start with the green stuff. Make friends with your local produce specialist and learn how to select fresh greens. That expensive stuff in a bag is fine if you're in a rush, but do you really want to pay someone to wash and prepare stuff that might not be the peak of fresh? Plus, we keep getting notice once or twice a year about e-coli outbreaks in bagged lettuce. Blarg.

I really like butter lettuce, but red-leaf is good too. Baby spinach is sweet and crunchy, and endive is popular but I find it bitter. It's good to eat your way through that section over a couple weeks and try each of the different choices before you settle on your favorites.

If you have access to a farmer's market, make friends with the people selling the greens. They know their stuff and can tell you cool factoids, like dandelion greens are best in the spring, before they get bitter. You can also find a CSA, or Community Supported Agriculture, and purchase a produce box from local farmers in your area – and have the happy satisfaction that you're helping your local economy, too!

Stuff that goes in a salad besides the green stuff? Well, it's still green, but it's all the other veggies that are green and not green: broccoli, tomatoes, carrots, mushrooms, scallions (green onions), etc. Wander your grocery aisle and look for stuff that looks tasty.

Non-salad stuff that goes in a salad: you can also put in nuts, meat, bacon, cheese, seeds, dried fruit, fresh fruit, (I love apples in a salad), hard boiled eggs, etc. You just need to be careful, if

you're eating the salad to cut down on your calorie intake, that you don't add it all back through the stuff you put in the salad.

Watch out for dressings. They're full of chemicals, fats, and all sorts of other stuff you don't really need to be ingesting. Learn to make your own. It's surprisingly simple to do. My favorite is raspberry vinegar. Adds no calories, but it's sweet and tangy and makes the greens pop.

BONUS POINTS: You don't have to have lettuce to have a good salad. I've been known to fill my bowl with all sorts of green things: sugar snap peas, bok choy, green onions, broccoli; and other colors: water chestnuts, baby corn, carrots, beets... You don't need the lettuce if you don't want to. If you add some cheese to that, and maybe diced apple, you don't even need the dressing!

MORE BONUS POINTS: As we learn more about the foods we eat and their link to things like diabetes, heart disease, and hypertension, more attention is being focused on how to eat foods that help us heal. It's elementary, really, but we've forgotten that link in our push for more and better chemicals and drugs. Rather than trying a new pill for something, why not try eating foods that will help reduce inflammation and tension? It's easy to do: focus on eating fruits and vegetables that are five different colors, every day. Example: lettuce is green, carrot is yellow/orange, onion is white, beet is red, and purple grapes are blue/purple.

Red fruits and vegetables include:

Beets, Cherries, Cranberries, Pink grapefruit, Pomegranates, Radishes, Raspberries, Red apples, Red cabbage, Red grapes, Red peppers, Red potatoes, Rhubarb, Strawberries, Tomatoes, Watermelon

Orange/Yellow fruits and vegetables include: Apricots, Butternut squash, Cantaloupe, Carrots, Grapefruit, Lemons, Mangoes, Nectarines, Oranges, Papayas, Peaches, Pears, Persimmons, Pineapple, Pumpkin, Rutabagas, Squash, Sweet corn, Sweet potatoes, Tangerines, Yellow apples, Yellow peppers, Yellow summer or winter, Yellow tomatoes, Yellow watermelon

Green fruits and vegetables include:

Artichokes, Asparagus, Avocados, Broccoli, Brussels sprouts, Cucumbers, Green apples, Green beans, Green cabbage, Green grapes, Green onions, Green pepper, Honeydew, melon, Kiwi, Lettuce, Limes, Peas, Spinach, Zucchini

Blue/Purple fruits and vegetables include:

Blackberries, Blueberries, Eggplant, Figs, Juneberries, Plums, Prunes, Purple grapes, Raisins

White fruits and vegetables include:

Bananas, Cauliflower, Garlic, Ginger, Jicama, Mushrooms, Onions, Parsnips, Potatoes, Turnips

Salacious Spinach Salad by Denise Agnew

I love cooked spinach. Yeah, that's right. I'm weird. But I never liked raw spinach before I broke down and tried this recipe. Warning, this recipe isn't for the strict health nut salad lover because of the sugar and bacon. I guess you could call it the, "I wanna eat healthy sorta" crowd. Yeah, I admit it. I sometimes fall into that group. This recipe is simple and fast, and you can add and subtract some of the ingredients if they aren't to your liking or your health plan. Enjoy!

Ingredients:

1 lb. fresh baby spinach leaves
6 hard boiled eggs, sliced or chopped
6 slices bacon (regular or turkey), cooked, drained and crumbled.
¼ cup cooking oil (canola)
6 tablespoons red wine vinegar
3 teaspoons of sugar (adjust for taste more or less).
½ teaspoon of salt
¼ teaspoon dry mustard
1 teaspoon grated onion (I've used chopped on a lazy day).
Sliced fresh mushrooms
Sliced green onions
Sliced black olives

Directions:

Toss spinach, eggs, and bacon. Add mushrooms and green onions. Wisk together cooking oil, vinegar, salt, dry mustard and sugar to form a dressing. At the last minute add the dressing to the salad and toss well. Eat immediately because the dressing will make the salad soggy somewhat quickly. I've also made this recipe minus mushrooms, onions and/or olives when I didn't have them available. I think the hard-boiled eggs are great with this salad even if you don't have the aforementioned mushrooms, green onions and olives.

Soups

Aunt Noony's Chicken Soup by A. Catherine Noon

Making chicken soup from scratch is phenomenally easy to make. It's useful to know how, since you can make it for yourself when you're feeling blue or when a friend or family member is ill and needs the nourishment.

1 large chicken

I like to use a capon, which we buy each year from Hinterstocker Farms in Wisconsin. If you can find a local source for free-range chickens, jump on it. You won't pay much more than you will for a chicken in the grocery store, but the taste will be ten times better – and it's a fresher bird, too.

2 chicken bouillon cubes

Soup needs salt, right? It's a lot better to use bouillon cubes, since it's got the salt but also the flavor. You can find organic bouillon if you look hard, but watch the flavor. I bought some that was WAY too salty. Experiment until you find something you like.

3 large onions

I'm a huge fan of Maui onions, because of their flavor. Any onions will do; I prefer yellow because they're sweeter, but red have good snap and white have the traditional sulfur tang. (Plus, they clean out your tear ducts.)

(That's a joke, of sorts, since onions make you cry when you cut them.)

4 large carrots

3 parsnips

"Parsnip... parsley..." "Parlay?" "That's the one!" (From *Pirates of the Caribbean, the Curse of the Black Pearl*) Johnny Depp really meant parsnips, a root vegetable that is not as common as the onion but makes lovely flavor in soups.

4 stalks of celery

1 bunch of fresh parsley

1 bunch of fresh rosemary

1 bunch of fresh sage

1 bunch of fresh thyme

You can find fresh herbs in the produce section of your grocery store, or at a local farmer's market. Highly recommend using fresh; they add a lot more flavor.

You can remember this spice blend from the song: "Parsley, Sage, Rosemary, and Thyme." It's a base for chicken soup. Truly. Look it up.

2 t peppercorns

You can find whole peppercorns at the grocer's, but I recommend going a little farther afield to broaden your palate. One excellent source is The Spice House, and they have an entire web page dedicated to pepper, at the following link: <http://www.thespicehouse.com/spices-by-category/pepper>.

5 cloves of garlic, put through a garlic press or chopped fine

If you don't have a garlic press, I highly suggest you get one. It takes a lot of the fuss and muss out of using garlic – which is, after all, one of the best foods on the planet. Don't believe me? I'm from California, as I mentioned, and every year, we have the Gilroy Garlic Festival in Gilroy, California. It's even got its own website: <http://gilroygarlicfestival.com/>. And if that weren't enough, there's an entire restaurant dedicated to this lovely root: The Stinking Rose. Also with its own website: <http://thestinkingrose.com/>. Don't laugh. Garlic is the key to good life.

Enough water to cover the chicken (about 4 quarts)

Melt a cooking oil of your choice (olive oil is very healthy, but you can also use roasted sesame oil or even bacon or butter) in a soup pot and add your chopped onion. Cook until the onion is soft and fragrant, and then add the garlic, parsley, sage, rosemary and thyme. Cook for another two to three minutes until the aroma becomes thick and herby. Add the carrots, parsnips, and celery and cook until the celery is nice and soft and pale green.

Rinse the chicken well and remove the innards from the inside of the cavity. (This is a weird experience if you've never done it.) Place it in a very large pot. If it's frozen, don't bother to defrost it first. You can just plunk it right in the pot as is. Cover with the water and bring to a boil. Add the peppercorns and bouillon cubes, lower the heat and cover. Simmer for about 2 hours.

Once done, pour the entire batch through a strainer (I use one of those metal ones on a handle, but you could also use your noodle strainer). Reserve the meat from the chicken and make chicken salad or add it back to the soup – it won't have much flavor anymore, since all that went

into the broth. Discard the bones and either eat or discard the vegetables (they're really mushy by now).

Let the soup cool. The fat will form a thick pasty stuff on the top; using a large spoon, take the fat off and discard. Reheat the soup and taste it; if it needs more salt add some Temari soy sauce and another bouillon cube. (Temari has a stronger flavor than plain old soy sauce; I recommend you find a good one.)

From here, it's up to you what to add to it to make your soup. Classic ingredients are carrots, parsnips, celery, peas and mushrooms. For a cold-buster soup, add anise seeds and orange sections (from 2 fresh oranges; don't use canned). For a more Asian flair, add some Chinese Five Spice powder (The Spice House has an excellent blend, here: <http://www.thespicehouse.com/spices/chinese-five-spice-powder>), water chestnuts and snap peas. Use your imagination. This is a hard soup to mess up; anything you like to have in chicken soup will work. Cook up a big batch of noodles and toss them in. The important thing is to experiment and enjoy yourself. Bon appetit!

Chicken Tortellini Soup by Renee Wildes

We live in central Wisconsin, and it gets COLD here. Of course I have a middle school daughter who figure skates, so we freeze outdoors AND in! So we've been finding yummy ways to use leftovers—AND stay warm! Soups are always good for a go-to.

Ingredients:

5 ½ cups hot water
½ lb. tortellini, cooked to package directions
1 cup diced chicken breast meat
1 cup diced celery
1 cup diced onion
2/3 cup diced carrots
5 chicken bouillon cubes
1 Tbsp. butter
1 Tbsp. chopped parsley
½ tsp. ground thyme
¼ tsp. garlic powder
Salt & white pepper to taste

Directions:

In a 3-qt saucepan, melt butter. Add carrots & sauté until tender. Add chicken & cook until white through. Add celery and onion & continue to cook another 4-5 minutes. Dissolve chicken bouillon cubes in hot water and add to soup with all remaining ingredients EXCEPT tortellini. Simmer soup until all vegetables are tender. Add salt & pepper to taste. Add cooked tortellini and heat through just before serving.

Easy Crab Bisque by Renee Wildes

Okay, so my dad's kin & clan live in Maine, where seafood's a staple. It's funny, HERE we'd kill for a good lobster, whereas THERE they're practically lying on the ground in everyone's backyard. And HERE bratwurst is like, a casual meal ranking right up there with hot dogs, but anytime we go to visit Maine my dad's like "Can you bring a cooler full of brats with you?" Because seriously, you can't get them there. Weird. Seafood is EXPENSIVE in Wisconsin, so we have to make do with cans. But this is quick, easy and yummy—as a working mom, I'm all for that!

Ingredients:

1 can crabmeat
1 can cream of mushroom soup
1 can cream of asparagus soup
1 cup cream
1 ¼ cup milk
¼ cup dry sherry
½ tsp. Worcestershire
½ tsp. Tabasco

Directions:

Mix first three ingredients in blender, puree until smooth. Put in saucepan to heat but DO NOT BOIL. Add the last 5 ingredients and heat through.

Seafood Chowder by Renee Wildes

This is another recipe from my Maine relatives. My daughter Tami loves chowder, and this is yummy on a cold day—drives our cat nuts, though! If anyone knows how to keep a cat off the counter, please message me from the "Contact Me" page of <http://www.reneewildes.net> because after 10 years of Chandra counter-jumping and trying to stick her paws in the cream, I give up!

Ingredients:

1-1/2 lb. haddock (or cod) fillets
1 lb. scallops
2 cans crabmeat
2 cans minced clams
2 cans shrimp
2 qt. milk
½ lb. butter
Salt & pepper to taste

Directions:

Do not throw the cooking water away—treat it like “fish stock” for flavor!

In large kettle, cook fish in salted boiling water until it's white through & flakes easily with fork. Remove fish, flake with fork & remove bones. Lower heat & simmer scallops in the fish water to cook, about 5 minutes or until done. Cut scallops in bite-sized pieces. Return scallop pieces & flaked fish to the cooking water. Add crabmeat, clams & shrimp—heat long enough to blend, stirring constantly. Add salt & pepper to taste. Add milk & butter until heated through and butter melts. Do not boil. Serve hot, topped with oyster crackers.

Sean Bean Soup by Nancy Lauzon

"Winter is coming."

The words of House Stark, spoken by Eddard Stark (Sean Bean), Lord of Winterfell (Game of Thrones by George R. R. Martin, Book One of A Song of Ice and Fire)

I would leave my husband if Sean Bean knocked on my door and asked me to run away with him. There, I said it. He's a hunka hunka man. Just keeping it real.

What does Sean Bean have to do with soup? Soup is hot, and so is Sean Bean. Also, the way he says "Winter is coming" on the hit show Game of Thrones gets ME hot. He could read the phone book and it would have the same effect. Must be the Yorkshire accent. In any case, thinking about Sean Bean makes me think about winter coming, and winter makes me think of soup.

When I don't feel like cooking much—most days—I often buy a rotisserie chicken at the grocery store. This recipe is great for rotisserie leftovers—or you can use the whole chicken, if you're making a big batch.

Ingredients:

1 Tbsp. vegetable oil
1 small onion, finely chopped
2 cloves garlic, finely chopped
1 1/2 tsp. chili powder
1/4 tsp. crushed red pepper
32 oz. low-sodium chicken broth
1 x 14.5 oz. can diced tomatoes
2 cups shredded rotisserie chicken
salt
2 Tbsp. fresh cilantro
4 oz. corn tortilla chips

Directions:

Warm vegetable oil in a large pot over medium heat. Add onion and cook, stirring until softened, about 5 min. Add garlic, chili powder and crushed red pepper; cook for 30 seconds, stirring constantly. Stir broth and tomatoes into pot and bring soup to a boil. Reduce heat to low and simmer 15 minutes. Stir in chicken and cook until heated through, 1 – 2 minutes, stirring occasionally. Season with salt. Stir in cilantro. Divide tortilla chips among 4 soup bowls. Ladle soup on top of chips and serve immediately. You can also serve with sour cream, diced avocado, chopped green onions, salsa, extra chips and lime wedges on the side.

Vegetarian Option – Replace chicken with canned pinto beans and swap chicken broth for vegetable broth.

Invite Sean Bean over for dinner and serve.

Spicy Zucchini Soup by Kimberley Troutte

How about a little love story to go with your soup?

You might not believe this, but I've had a crush on my husband since I was ten and he was eleven. He was shy, serious, and so handsome. I loved how he rescued animals from the side of the road, even the weird ones like snakes and lizards. Miraculously, he loved me too.

I remember the first time I served zucchini soup to his mother and Nana. We were newly married and I wasn't much of a cook. Being a bit nervous about serving my in-laws, I heavy-handed the spices and turned the soup into a raging tongue burner. Holy cow, that soup was spicy.

The women tried to cough and choke it down but eventually gave up. Mortified, I apologized for the blunder with cheeks blazing hotter than that darned soup. But hubby, who had sweat running down his face, told me it was good and asked for seconds. My hero. How I love that man.

Lesson: Go easy with the cayenne pepper.

Ingredients:

3 cans chicken broth
6 cups sliced zucchini with peel on
2 cups milk or cream
4 tsp sour cream
2 tablespoons powdered chicken bouillon
pinch of cayenne pepper
salt and pepper to taste

Directions:

Cook zucchini in chicken broth until tender, approx. 15 minutes. Scoop zucchini out of the broth and purée in a mixer. Return to broth. Add milk and seasoning. Heat but do not boil. Pour into bowls and add a dollop of sour cream to each serving.

Serves 6-8.

Wisconsin Cheddar Cheese Soup by Renee Wildes

This is totally awesome. I have friends that add beer to this recipe for Beer Cheese soup, but I must confess I don't like beer. I'm totally a wine—or Cosmo kinda gal, so we skip the beer—and this way the kids can enjoy. What other kind of soup would you expect us to make in the Dairy State?

Ingredients:

4 cups chicken broth
1 ½ cups medium Cheddar cheese, shredded
1 ½ cups aged/sharp Cheddar cheese, shredded
½ cup onion, finely chopped
½ cup green pepper, finely chopped
½ cup carrots, finely chopped
½ cup flour
¼ cup butter

Directions:

Melt butter in a 3-qt. saucepan. Add vegetables & cook until tender but not brown. Add flour, stirring briskly. Add chicken broth. Cook, stirring constantly, until thick & bubbly. Cook and stir an additional minute. Add cheeses gradually, stirring constantly, until melted. Season with pepper to taste. Simmer 15 minutes.

CHAPTER ONE (Entrees)

Beef

Amazing Brown Sugar Meatloaf by Denise Agnew

This is another recipe with an ingredient I never expected to see combined with meatloaf. Brown sugar. Yep. At first it sounds...I dunno, not quite right. But I love it.

Ingredients:

½ cup packed brown sugar
½ cup ketchup
1 ½ lbs lean ground beef or ground turkey
¾ cup milk
2 eggs
¼ teaspoon black pepper
1 small onion chopped or substitute with equivalent onion powder
¼ teaspoon ground ginger
1 cup bread crumbs (I often use Italian bread crumbs because of the added flavor.)

Directions:

Preheat oven to 350 degrees. Lightly grease a 5x9 loaf pan. Place two slices of bread in the bottom of the pan to absorb moisture if you prefer (not a requirement, just a trick to ward off soupy meat loaf). In mixing bowl combine all ingredients except for brown sugar and ketchup. There are two ways to approach the “topping.” Mix the ketchup and brown sugar together and spread on top of the loaf. Or, top the loaf first with brown sugar and then ketchup. Bake in oven for one hour until juices are clear.

Crock Pot Beef Stroganoff by Renee Wildes

Lemme tell ya, for those of us that work 8-12 hours a day outside the home, (yes, I have a day job) the crockpot is an absolute LIFESAVER! Nothing like coming home to “supper’s done.” Makes the whole house smell yummy—and makes everyone hungry. I love mushrooms, so this recipe is right up my alley! You want to add the sour cream last minute, so it doesn’t break down.

Ingredients:

3-4 lbs. beef sirloin steak, cubed
2 cans chicken broth
1 lb. sliced fresh mushrooms
1 can regular cola
½ cup chopped onion
1 envelope dry onion soup mix
2 tsp. garlic powder
2 tsp. dried parsley flakes
½ tsp. black pepper
2 envelopes dry country gravy mix
2 cups sour cream
Hot cooked egg noodles

Directions:

In slower cooker/crock pot, combine first nine ingredients. Cover and cook on low for 7-8 hours until meat is tender.

With a slotted spoon, remove beef & mushrooms. Place gravy mix in large saucepan, gradually whisk in cooking liquid. Bring to a boil, cook & stir for 2 minutes until thickened. Add sour cream immediately before serving. Serve beef & mushrooms over noodles, top with gravy.

Sweet and Sour Meatballs by Nancy Lauzon

We lived in Sydney, Nova Scotia for a while, and at that time I was very active in my local church. Those church ladies knew how to cook, and could whip up dinner for 300 people without blinking an eyelash. This was one of the recipes I discovered through them, and people ask me for it all the time. The sauce is also delicious with baked ribs. A true classic!

Ingredients:

1 ½ lbs. lean ground beef
½ cup milk
½ cup bread crumbs
1 egg, beaten
Salt and pepper to taste

Directions:

Mix all of the above together and form 1 inch meatballs. Brown meatballs in a frying pan in batches over medium heat and place in greased casserole dish.

Sauce Ingredients:

1 cup ketchup
½ cup water
3 Tbsp. brown sugar
4 Tbsp. vinegar
1 Tbsp. Worcestershire sauce
3 Tbsp. soy sauce
1 Tbsp. cornstarch
1 onion, sliced

Directions:

Mix together with whisk. Pour over browned meatballs. Top with onion slices. Cover. Bake in 325 oven for 1 ½ hours. Serve over rice or noodles.

Shepherd's Pie by Nancy Lauzon

Also called Cottage Pie—one of my family's favorite meals. I have no idea where the name comes from. Maybe because back in the day mutton was used instead of beef. There are many variations of this dish, but I adapted my mother-in-law's recipe to suit hubby's tastes. In other words, no mushrooms or any other vegetable is used except for onion and corn.

Ingredients:

1 1/2 lbs. lean ground beef
1 small onion, chopped
salt & pepper to taste
2 1/2 cups beef stock
2 Tbsp. (or more) of Bisto (or any gravy thickener) mixed in a bit of cold water to make a smooth paste
1 Tbsp. dried parsley
1 tsp. dried basil
1 tsp. steak spice
mashed potatoes
frozen corn

Directions:

Make a pot of mashed potatoes. Brown ground beef and onion in skillet until beef is crumbly and onion is transparent. Add salt, pepper, herbs and steak spice and cook a few minutes, stirring. Add beef stock. When it comes to a boil, simmer a few minutes, then add Bisto (mixed in cold water). Bring to a simmer again and cook for approx. 5 minutes until thickened. Put in casserole dish. Top with a layer of frozen corn. Top with mashed potatoes. Sprinkle with paprika. Bake in 350 oven for 30 – 40 minutes until brown and bubbly.

Chicken and Turkey

A Divine Chicken Divan by Nancy Lauzon

My sister introduced me to this recipe. I like it because it's easy to make, kids love it and it's great to use up leftover chicken. It's equally good with leftover turkey at Thanksgiving or Christmas. There are many variations out there, but this recipe is popular with our family.

Ingredients:

1 bunch of broccoli (use frozen broccoli if you don't have fresh on hand)
1 ½ cups cooked chicken or turkey, cubed
1 can cream of chicken soup
½ can of milk
½ cup shredded cheddar cheese
1 Tbsp. melted butter
2 Tbsp. breadcrumbs

Directions:

Preheat oven to 400 degrees. Cook broccoli until tender crisp (approximately 5 minutes). Drain. Put in bottom of greased casserole dish. Top with chicken. Combine soup and milk, whisking together. Pour over chicken. Sprinkle with cheese. Combine butter and bread crumbs, sprinkle over cheese. Cover and bake until bubbly and hot, approximately 25 minutes. Serve with pasta or rice.

Chicken or Turkey Divan by Renee Wildes

I'm big on casseroles and comfort food. This is the perfect kind of "passing" dish for potlucks and informal get-togethers. This is a multi-tasking kind of recipe—it's a fab way to "recycle/repurpose" leftovers AND it's a great way to hide/doctor vegetables for pick kids so they eat them. Actually, we have a rule in my house that the kids were allowed to pick ONE vegetable that they absolutely do NOT have to eat, with the understanding that they agree to eat every OTHER vegetable. They both unanimously chose to boycott Brussels sprouts, and so cheerfully (mostly) eat their spinach and broccoli. :)

Ingredients:

2 10-oz. pkgs. frozen broccoli
2 cups cubed, cooked chicken or turkey
1 can cream of chicken soup
¼ cup sour cream

1 Tbsp. lemon juice
1 tsp. soy sauce
¼ tsp. garlic powder
1 Tbsp. melted butter
½ cup dry bread crumbs
¼ cup parmesan cheese

Directions:

Preheat oven to 350. Mix bread crumbs & parmesan cheese in small bowl. In a separate bowl, mix together soup, sour cream, lemon juice, soy sauce & garlic powder. In a 9" x 13" pan, layer broccoli and chicken/turkey. Pour soup mix over top. Sprinkle bread/cheese mix over top & drizzle with melted butter. Bake for 30 minutes until hot & bubbly, top is golden and broccoli is almost tender.

Chicken/Spinach Casserole with Wild Rice & Mushrooms by Renee Wildes

This is a "dress up" kind of casserole that will hold its own at Sunday dinner—with the in-laws. I can't complain, though—my in-laws ROCK. You can see a picture of the WHOLE Mickelson clan on my personal Facebook page. We did a family portrait on the front porch steps. Someday I want to have a house with a wraparound porch. I HATE being a country gal stuck in the city!

Ingredients:

3 cups diced cooked chicken (or turkey)
1 ½ cups half-and-half
2 ½ cups chicken broth
1 10-oz. pkg. frozen spinach, thawed & drained
1 cup uncooked wild rice
1 cup white rice
1 cup sliced fresh mushrooms
½ cup chopped onion
½ cup butter
½ cup flour
½ cup slivered almonds
2 Tbsp. dried parsley
1 clove garlic, minced

1 ½ tsp. salt
¼ tsp. pepper

Directions:

Preheat oven to 350. Cook rice according to package directions & combine together. In large skillet, sauté onions & garlic in butter until tender but not browned. Remove from heat & stir in flour. Gradually stir in chicken broth, then add half-and-half. Cook & stir until thickened. Add cooked rice, chicken, spinach, mushrooms, parsley, and salt & pepper. Mix together thoroughly. Place in large, ungreased casserole; sprinkle almonds on top. Bake for approximately 30 minutes.

Chicken/Turkey Tetrazzini by Renee Wildes

When I was in 4th grade, I had a magical teacher named Diane Taber who was an incredible cook—who never measured anything! She'd make something really awesome, and we'd be like, "How do you make this?" And she'd go, "Well, it's a handful of this...and two shakes of that..." You know—THAT kind of cook. So I went YEARS trying to find a recipe that came CLOSE—and I found it. This is a cool, easy-peasy recipe from one of my daughter Tami's fellow Timberline Figure Skating Club members, Nikki Ogstad. Yes, it's got mushrooms in it. What can I say? I'm obsessed.

Ingredients:

8 oz. thin spaghetti or vermicelli—cooked to taste, drained & rinsed
2 cups cooked chicken or turkey, diced
2 cups chicken broth
1 cup cream
1 cup grated parmesan cheese (divide in half)
12 oz. sliced mushrooms, sautéed
1/3 cup butter
1/3 cup sherry wine
¼ cup flour
2 cloves garlic, pressed
1 tsp. salt
¼ tsp. pepper

Directions:

Preheat oven at 375. Butter a casserole dish. Melt butter in large skillet. Blend in flour, salt, garlic & pepper. Add chicken broth & cream. Cook until slightly thickened, stirring constantly. Add sherry & HALF the parmesan cheese, then ALL the spaghetti, chicken & mushrooms. Mix well & dump into the casserole dish. Sprinkle with remaining parmesan cheese. Bake for 30-45 minutes until hot & bubbly & golden brown on top.

Great when served with garlic bread or cheesy bread!

Kalamata Feta Chicken by Denise Agnew

A very easy chicken recipe with good flavor!

Ingredients:

¼ teaspoon pepper
½ teaspoon salt
10 pitted kalamata olives, chopped
1 teaspoon dried oregano
8 grape tomatoes
parsley to taste
¼ cup crumbled feta cheese with basil and sun-dried tomatoes
4 skinless, boneless chicken breast halves
½ cup water

Directions:

Combine olives, tomato, parsley, cheese, oregano and 1/8 teaspoon salt. Coat a large skillet with cooking spray. Coat chicken with spray as well and sprinkle with salt and pepper. Cook chicken at least six minutes on each side. Transfer to serving platter and keep warm. Add water to pan, bring to boil and scrape pan to loosen browned bits. Pour mixture over chicken. Top with olive mixture. Delish. This recipe is good with orzo or rice.

Off The Charts Chili by Denise Agnew

Chili is always a favorite at my house, and this recipe is versatile enough you can change some things up!

Ingredients:

- 1 ½ pounds lean ground turkey (or lean ground beef)
- 2 cups chopped onion
- 1 cup chopped green bell pepper
- 4 garlic cloves, minced (you can use jarred garlic)
- 1 tablespoon chili powder
- 2 tablespoons brown sugar
- 1 teaspoon cumin
- 3 tablespoons tomato paste
- 1 teaspoon dried oregano
- ½ teaspoon black pepper
- 2 bay leaves
- 1 ¼ cups Merlot or other red wine to taste. (Red cooking wine is okay but lacks something.)
- 2 cans diced tomatoes
- 2 cans kidney beans (rinsed and drained)
- ½ cup shredded reduced fat sharp Cheddar cheese

Directions:

Heat a large Dutch oven over medium high heat. Add meat, onion, bell pepper, garlic, and chili powder. Cook until meat is browned, stirring to crumble. Add wine, tomato paste, sugar, cumin, oregano, black pepper, tomatoes, bay leaves and beans. Bring to a boil, then reduce heat and cover. After 30 minutes discard bay leaves. Cook an additional 30 minutes and its ready!

Serve with cheese.

Modification suggestions: If you want a quicker, milder chili, I suggest trimming down the seasoning to: 1 cup onion, ½ cup green pepper, ½ teaspoon cumin. I've also made this with MSG free/low sodium taco seasoning from the store and cut out the pepper, oregano, cumin, chili powder, and green peppers. That sounds like a lot of seasonings to take out, but it still tastes delish and if you want a quicker chili this helps. I think the two ingredients that kick this recipe up into fabulous includes the wine and the brown sugar. You can tell from these last two recipes that I like brown sugar, can't you? Happy eating!

Roast Chicken by A. Catherine Noon

Roasting a chicken is one of the easiest things to do in the kitchen and is so much better than anything processed that you'll be amazed you didn't try it before. You can use the techniques to roast other kinds of fowl, once you have some practice; before you know it, you'll be having turkey breast, duck, and Cornish game hens at dinner. You can thank me later.

Ingredients:

For now, you want a 4 to 4.5 pound roasting chicken (1.81 to 2 kg)

Try to find a place that has fresh, not frozen, chicken. You're likely to find it at a local butcher shop as opposed to the ones at the grocery store; they taste a lot better.

2 to 3 T of fat; something like butter or olive oil (or, if you're old school, vegetable shortening)

1 onion, finely minced

1 t dried thyme

1 t dried sage

1 T dried parsley flakes

1 t dried rosemary

1 t salt

1/2 t pepper

As a bonus, slice up enough potatoes (I like using either red new potatoes or one of those bags of mixed colored potatoes with the purple, russet, red, Yukons, etc.) to cover the bottom of your roasting pan. Slice them about a centimeter or half inch thick in little disks and arrange them on the bottom, then arrange another sliced onion in rings on top, then another row of potatoes. They get steeped in the chicken drippings and are YUMMY.

Directions:

Preheat your oven to 425 F, 218 C. Put the rack in the center so the heat circulates well around the pan.

Using a shallow baking pan, spread olive oil around the bottom to keep it from sticking. If you're fortunate enough to know someone who has a Pampered Chef business, their ceramic baking dish is terrific, or spring for a baking pan at Williams Sonoma. You'll spend for it, but it'll be something you have for life.

Remove the innards from the cavity of the chicken.

Wash the chicken with cold water, inside and out, and pat dry.

Place breast side down in the baking dish. This lets all the juices flow into the breast meat.

Rub the skin with the fat and sprinkle your seasonings and onion over it.

Insert a meat thermometer into the thicker part of the breast; make sure you don't touch a bone.

Reduce the heat to 375 F, 191 C, and put the chicken in the oven.

Roast for 20 minutes a pound, until the thermometer reads 180 F, 82 C.

Check it periodically to make sure the top doesn't burn. If it starts to get too brown, cover with aluminum foil, shiny side down.

Note: If you don't have a thermometer, you can tell if it's done when the juices run clear and not pink. You should be able to wiggle the legs freely. Cut into some meat at the leg and see that it's not pink.

Set it on your cutting board for about 15 minutes, breast side up. This takes practice, so don't expect to have perfect slices the first time. Slice down in thick pieces. You can use your fingers to separate the meat.

Check out my recipe for how to mash potatoes like an Irishman. They're a perfect accompaniment to the chicken.

Romance Is In the Mayonnaise by A. Catherine Noon

Anticipation makes the sex better. There's a lot to be said for a good "quickie," but one shouldn't overlook the power of seduction and foreplay. And foreplay doesn't just mean the tongue, the hands, or massage. Sometimes, foreplay is literally the play that comes before.

When you have your next date night, and if you don't have a date night scheduled, best get on that right away, plan to make a special dinner for your lover. If you're fortunate enough to have more than one lover at the same time, then simply multiply the recipe for the mouths you're feeding. Bonus tip: if your lover works outside the home, make enough to pack for lunch the next work day. Talk about afterglow. Make them remember you with every bite.

Rowr.

So. Lessee. What can we make that will make them think of us under the fluorescent lights of the office, or wherever they are the next day?

Ingredients:

12 ounces boneless chicken breast, skinned

6 T dry white wine

If I meant cooking wine, I'd've said cooking wine. If you have any cooking wine in your fridge, throw it out right now and go to your local liquor supplier and get yourself a good, inexpensive Chardonnay.

If you can't use alcohol, then use chicken broth.

If you don't have chicken broth, go get some. You can buy it in the can or in an aseptic package that will stay in your fridge and keep for a week or two. It's useful in cooking – cook your rice with it, or make mashed potatoes from scratch. Even warm up a cup like tea in the microwave when you have the munchies but don't want to pack on the pounds. It's satisfying since it's protein and satisfies the urge for salt. Yum.

Okay, now where was I? If you keep interrupting like this, we'll never get to dinner. Sheesh.

2 T lemon juice

2 t honey

You can use sugar, but honey is just as sweet and better for you. Try all the different varieties out there, don't just assume orange blossom is the only kind you can have. Pine honey is lovely, and there are a bunch of others.

2 small cloves garlic minced or pressed in a garlic press

.5 t curry powder – if you can, get yours from The Spice House. This place is amazing. Once you try it, you won't go back to supermarket, dried-out spices. Trust me.

<http://www.thespicehouse.com/spices-by-category/curry-powder>

Dash of ground pepper

If you don't have peppercorns in a grinder, go out and get a grinder and some peppercorns (Spice House has lovely ones). You can get grinders anywhere from Target to fancy cooking stores like Sur la Table or Williams Sonoma. Fresh pepper is worth it.

1 t cornstarch

2 T cooking oil – anything will do, but high quality extra-Virgin olive is yummy

2 C broccoli flowerets

4 green onions (scallions, cut into ½ inch or 1 centimeter pieces)

2 T mayonnaise

1 C cooked rice with 1t of turmeric (also get from Spice House); I like California Hinode Brown Rice but any cooked rice will work; cook it in 2 C of broth instead of water

Directions:

Using a rice maker or pot, cook the rice according to the directions on the package, using chicken broth instead of water. While it's cooking, prepare the chicken, below.

Cut chicken into thin strips and set aside.

In a medium mixing bowl, combine wine or broth, lemon juice, honey, garlic, curry powder, and pepper. Whisk well to blend.

Add chicken to bowl, rubbing the chicken and making sure it gets coated by the liquid.

Let chicken stand at room temperature for 20 to 30 minutes in the marinade.

Drain chicken, reserving marinade. If needed, add enough broth to make ½ C liquid. Stir in cornstarch, set aside.

Preheat a medium skillet over high heat, then add oil.

Stir-fry broccoli and green onions in hot oil about 90 seconds or until crisp-tender. Remove from skillet.

Add chicken to skillet. Stir-fry about 2 minutes or until tender.

Push chicken from the center of the skillet and return the vegetables. Stir in the cornstarch mixture.

Cook about 1 more minute, stirring constantly, until heated through.

Remove from heat and stir in the mayonnaise.

Add the turmeric to the rice and stir well. Serve rice in small bowls or plates, and spoon the chicken and vegetables over the top.

For dessert, use your imagination. Bonus tip: soak the rice pot in hot, soapy water. TRUST me. You'll be glad in the morning when you don't have a gelatinous concrete mixture in your pot or rice maker.

Scrumptious Fajitas by Denise Agnew

I think these fajitas kick ass and take names. Dig in.

Ingredients:

1 8 oz jar/bottle of low sodium Teriyaki sauce
1 large red onion
1 large green pepper
1 large red pepper
1 package of chicken breasts (five breasts) or chicken tenders.
Tomato
Shredded Cheddar cheese
Soft flour tortillas

Directions:

Cut red and green peppers into slices and put them into separate bowls.

Cut up red onion and put in its own bowl.

Cut chicken into strips (unless you bought tenders) and place in a bowl.

Use another large container and layer red, green peppers and onion with meat one after the other.

Pour entire bottle of teriyaki over the ingredients.

Cover and let stand for 24 hours.

Mix and then allow it to marinate another 24 hours before cooking.

To cook: Drain excess marinade from mixture.

Separate meat from onion and peppers.

Cook peppers and onions until half done and then add meat.

Stir frequently until cooked.

Serve with tortillas.

Delicious.

As for modifications: I don't recommend full sodium Teriyaki sauce. It's way too salty for me.

The Quickie (chicken stir fry mash-up) by A. Catherine Noon

Let's face it. Sometimes, there's just not enough time for all the preparation, the toys, the sensual build-up, the foreplay, the main event, the follow-up, the afterglow, the cleanup, and the nap. Sometimes, it's gotta be now.

For those moments, I like to have a few tried-and-true recipes in my back pocket that I can throw in a pan to feed myself and my hungry partner.

After all, we must keep up our energy.

So. What to do?

This isn't a recipe, in the strict sense of the word. More, it's a trip into the kitchen with Noony, which may or may not be a good thing. Come along with me and find out. You'll be glad you did—and we'll be done in a jiffy!

Collect chicken parts (doesn't really matter which, but I like chicken breasts), enough for you and a partner. (It goes without saying that these are things you should buy and keep in your freezer as a staple item.) If you need to thaw your chicken, do so in the microwave.

Now hold it. Do not use the fancy "defrost chicken" setting on the stupid thing. You're a chef, not an automaton. Put the chicken on a plate, put the plate in the microwave, and then put it on 3 minutes at 50 per cent power. Period.

No, don't argue with me. TRUST the Noony.

If the chicken is thawed enough to cut, you're done. If not, hit it for another 2 minutes on 50% power. Then put it on a cutting board and use your best, sharp chef's knife.

Wait. You don't have a chef's knife?

Go buy one. Right now. You need a good, sharp knife in your kitchen. Come back and finish the recipe when you've got your knife.

Wait! Put the chicken in the fridge first. What, you want your cats to eat it?

Okay. Take your knife, and if it's brand new, WASH IT IN HOT SOAPY WATER. You don't want the gathering of whatzits in your food, do you? Didn't think so. Sheesh! We'll be at this all night if you keep interrupting me.

Cut the chicken into one-inch strips, about two inches long. An inch is 2.54 centimeters, you can do the math. It's good for you. Makes you hungry.

Where was I? Oh, right. Chicken.

Get out a skillet. Put some oil in the skillet. What kind of oil? I don't know, what's your favorite? I like olive or roasted sesame. How much? Enough, I say! Enough oil to coat the bottom of the pan. Coat it, silly, not fill it! Pour a dollop about 2 inches in diameter and let it spread around the pan.

Cut up some onions, or scallions, or leeks. Something oniony. Put that in the oil and sauté them. Then plop the chicken into the pan. Take some fresh broccoli flowers, or snap peas, or something

yummy and green, and put that in too. If you don't have fresh, then put some frozen vegies in there. Trader Joe's carries frozen artichokes—OMG ! LOFF! If you use frozen, put the veggies in first, let them thaw and steam and stuff, then put the chicken in.

While the chicken is busy sizzling, splash some wine on it. White wine is good. If you bought cooking wine, throw it out. It's garbage. What makes it cooking wine is they add salt to it. Blarg! Gross. Use a wine you'd like to drink. If you don't know what to buy, get a Chardonnay.

To this, add a splash of cranberry juice, some Worcester sauce, and a dab of hot mustard—Grey Poupon is good, or some seedy German kind that's hard to pronounce. Grab some nuts—any will do, peanuts or cashews are my favorite but mixed nuts work too. Don't forget your spices. Wander your spice shelf and sprinkle some garlic powder, oregano, or Italian herb blend. Sprinkle lots; don't do this "one quarter teaspoon" nonsense. That's for the lowest common denominator of palate—i.e. people who can't taste food. Use some gumption!

Let all this simmer and shake and when the chicken is done (cut a piece and no more pink in the middle means done), serve with something ice-cold to drink. Voila.

Then use your imagination for dessert. YUM!

You and Me Together Tacos by Kimberley Troutte

In the summer of 2011, my family rented a house in Northern California near the Russian River with a group of avid cyclists. This was an amazing experience. While the bikers sweated the hill climbs, the rest of us non-cyclists took nature hikes. The best part came after the workouts—dinnertime.

Holy smokes, my friends can cook. We all loved the food, but Jim—the only bachelor in the group—seemed especially overjoyed by the outrageously good meals. His heartfelt compliments to each “chef” will always be remembered.

One night, Ana and Sandra prepared a Mexican dinner better than any restaurant dish I’ve ever ordered. This was impressive in itself, but their culinary magic was topped the next day when they used the leftovers to create shredded chicken tacos for all of us. I was astounded by how easy they made it look.

I will never forget the good times we had that week. Laughing and sharing meals with friends was a beautiful gift. A forever present. Eight months later our sweet bachelor, Jim, was struck by a driver while riding his bike in the bike lane. He was instantly killed. My heart breaks even still.

In honor of good friends and happy times, here is my taco recipe which includes my friend Tina's recipe for homemade taco shells.

Taco shells

Ingredients:

2 cups of yellow cornmeal
4 cups of flour
1 tsp. salt
2 eggs
5 cups of water

Mix together first three ingredients. Beat the eggs and pour into dry ingredients. Pour the water in slowly, mixing into batter. The batter should be thin but not too watery. Grease and heat griddle to med-med/high. Pour 1/3 cup of the batter on the griddle and spread out in a circle with the back of a large spoon, not too thinly. It will look dry. Flip in 10-15 seconds until dry on both sides. Makes 16 shells.

Tacos

Ingredients:

2 boneless chicken breasts
2-3 tablespoons of olive oil
1 tsp. of crushed garlic
2 tsp. Mrs. Dash
2 tsp. chili powder
Pepper
Can of favorite salsa

Directions:

Boil two boneless, skinless chicken breasts in a pot of water until cooked. Remove the breast from the pot to cool then place on a cutting board and shred with a fork. With a pan heating on medium, add crushed garlic and enough olive oil to coat the bottom of the pan. Add the chicken and coat with Mrs. Dash, chili powder, and pepper to taste. Add a can of your favorite salsa to the chicken mixture.

Lightly spray or coat a baking pan with olive oil. Place about two spoonsful of the chicken mixture in a tortilla and add graded cheese of your choice into taco shells (sometimes I add black beans, or hominy as well). Bake in the oven at 350 until cheese is melted.

To add to the table: Guacamole, diced onion, salsa, sour crème, cooked black beans, and chopped lettuce.

In large pan, heat oil on medium heat. Sauté onions, peppers, jalapeño and garlic for 3 or 4 minutes. Stir in all seasonings, cook 1 minute. Add corn, milk and water and bring to a boil. Gradually, whisk in cornmeal and return to a boil. Cook over low heat, stirring occasionally for about 25 minutes. Pour into pie plate or other cooking dish. Cool completely. Sprinkle with cheese, bake 10-15 minutes at 400 degrees. Sprinkle with cilantro.

Serves 4-6.

Fish and Seafood

Fishy Girl's Cerveza Halibut by Kimberley Troutte

I didn't eat fish too often as a kid. Would you if your name was Troutte (pronounced Trout)? Don't get me started on the teasing that I took as a little girl. It wasn't pretty, especially with Jimmy River in the same class. Ugh. In high school, one of my nicknames was Fishy. Pretty. I thank God that my parents didn't name me Brooke.

Now that I'm an adult, I love my name and I'm getting better about eating the distant "relatives". This recipe should win over the sealed-lips non-fish-eaters. I mean, come on, beer and halibut?

It's a winning combination.

Add a little tartar sauce and you've got a win-win-win.

Ingredients:

1 lb. halibut, cut in small pieces

beer for marinade

Bisquick

oil for frying

Directions:

Cover fish in beer and marinate for 2 to 3 hours. Dip in Bisquick until completely coated. Fry in approx 1 1/2 inches of hot cooking oil until golden brown. Drain on a paper towel.

Serves 4-6

Seafood Casserole by Renee Wildes

I have a recipe for Lobster Casserole that works well with other seafoods. Since lobster's hard to come by in Wisconsin (at least on THIS working mom's budget) –we don't even have a Red Lobster here –I've experimented with shrimp, cod and haddock variations. My Grandma Esther's rolling in her grave right now, but substitution can be fun...*cough cough*

Ingredients:

3 cups lobster (insert seafood alternative) meat
8 Tbsp. butter
8 Tbsp. flour
6 Tbsp. sherry
10 slices bread
2 pints cream
2 Tbsp. lemon juice
2 beaten eggs
1-1/2 tsp. dry mustard
1/2 tsp. salt
1/2 tsp. paprika
1 pkg. (sleeve) crushed Ritz crackers (for topping)—or cornflakes

Directions:

Preheat oven to 325. In skillet melt 2 Tbsp. butter, add meat & cook until just done. In large mixing bowl, combine REST of butter, flour, lemon juice, egg, mustard, paprika, salt and HALF the cream. Add the meat & stir. Tear the bread into small pieces and add to mix. Add rest of cream slowly—as much as needed to give a medium thickness to "batter." (You might not use it all) Lastly, add sherry. Pour into large casserole dish; top with crackers. Bake 30-40 minutes or until hot & bubbly and golden brown on top.

Tasty-Licious Tuna Tetrazzini by Kimberley Troutte

I was a little picky as a child. Okay, maybe a lot picky, especially when it came to eating fish.

Only a few non-fishy dishes, such as breaded and baked fish sticks, would pass my lips. I mentioned on another recipe that part of the reason I steered clear of swimming animals was because my last name is pronounced Trout (like the fish).

In fact, the family name had been Trout until my grandmother asked her groom to change the spelling on their wedding day. She figured that if she had to change her name, he should too. And she thought the original spelling was too plain, so she added the extra “t” and “e”. Her groom loved her dearly and agreed.

As a kid, I thought eating a river trout was sort of like eating a “relative”. I didn’t actually try the delicious, sweet fish until I was full grown and married. Silly.

I would eat tuna as a child, though. (Don’t ask me why). Throw in spaghetti, olives and cheese and I’d ask for seconds.

You might want to try this recipe on your picky eaters.

Ingredients:

- 4 oz. spaghetti, broken into 3 inch pieces
- 1 can cream of celery or chicken soup
- 1/2 cup non-fat milk
- 2 cans of tuna, drained, flaked
- 1 can sliced mushrooms
- 1/3 cup chopped onion
- 1/4 cup sliced black olives
- 8 oz. cheddar cheese

Cook spaghetti, drain. Stir in soup and milk. Add remaining ingredients, reserving 1/2 cup cheese for topping. Mix lightly. Pour into 1 1/2 qt. casserole, bake at 350 degrees for 45 minutes. Top with remaining cheese, heat until cheese melts.

Serves 4-6

Pasta

Dinner A La Leftovers by Selena Robins

I bet some of you thought we just fantasize and write about hot firemen/cowboys/military/bad boys/Alpha/Beta heroes, eh?

Well, I'm here to tell you that yes, we do, but we also have to cook for our families, and the faster and easier the recipe, the better.

Ingredients:

1 Crock Pot (Some places call them Slow Cookers)

Tomato Sauce (See Sexy Sassy Sauce recipe in this book) If you don't have time to make tomato sauce from scratch or have any leftover homemade tomato sauce, I understand. In its place you can use (can't believe I'm suggesting this...but here goes...) store bought jar sauce. I know, I've said NEVER EVER do this, but, we're talking efficient, fast, dinner here.

One can of chickpeas (don't worry, no chicks will be injured in the making of this recipe), drained and rinsed.

One can of lentils (drained and rinsed)

Any leftover vegetables that are sitting in your fridge and in danger of becoming a science experiment.

I use zucchini—chopped, drizzled with a bit of olive oil and roasted, before adding to the recipe.

You can use any leftover vegetables, except Brussel sprouts. They are the devil's veggie. Sorry, I don't mean to offend, it's one vegetable I don't like.

Whatever vegetable you use, first sauté or roast them before adding to the crock pot.

Pasta (gluten-free, with gluten, whatever you prefer.)

Freshly grated Parmesan cheese (or any kind of cheese you have that needs using).

Cheese makes the tomatoes and pasta combo even that much better, right?

Can I get a hell, yeah, on that?

I'm talking fresh cheese, not that "plastic cheese" also known as Kraft slices or anything in a tube. Even with leftovers, I will not negotiate on this.

Sea Salt & Pepper to taste (red chili peppers are great in this dish)

Directions: (They don't get any easier than this)

Add the following inside a crock pot: Leftover vegetables, tomato sauce, lentils, chickpeas, salt & pepper.

Stir.

Set your crock pot on low for 4 – 6 hours. (Even less time if you want, basically you're marrying all the flavor together.)

Go out and have some fun.

Come back, bring a pot of salted water to boil, cook your pasta al dente.

Drain pasta.

Stir in crock pot mixture.

Top with freshly grated Parmesan cheese.

There you go. Easy, right?

Pasta E Fagioli For The Italian Soul by Selena Robins

Whether you're Italian or not, everyone remembers Dean Martin's enthusiastic crooning of the song; That's Amore, and I bet a lot of you can sing the chorus. When he mentioned Pasta Fazool in the song, he was referring to one of my family's favorite dishes—it's rustic, delicious, healthy and easy to make.

Dean Martin took creative license when singing fazool, and it worked beautifully for the song.

The real pronunciation for this dish is fah-joe-lee.

This recipe is a delicious one pot wonder and makes for a hearty entrée. It can be made and eaten the same day, but it tastes even better if you make it a day ahead of time and serve it the next day, as all the ingredients and goodness marinate together.

Ingredients:

Olive Oil

5 fresh tomatoes, chopped (or a can of plum tomatoes)

2 carrots (thinly sliced)

1 stalk celery (finely chopped)

2 leeks (sliced and chopped)

1 cup onion (finely chopped)

2 cloves garlic (minced)

6 cups beef broth (or vegetable stock)

1 can red kidney beans (drained and well rinsed)

1 can white kidney beans (drained and well rinsed)

½ cup fresh basil (chopped)

1 ½ cups of thinly sliced Italian sausage

1 lb. lean ground beef

Pinch red pepper flakes, optional

Freshly grated Parmesan cheese

Pasta (your choice: penne, elbow, tubetti)

Directions:

Brown sausage and ground beef, drain and set aside.

Coat soup pot with olive oil and heat oil on medium.

Once oil is heated, add onion and leeks and cook until onion is transparent, then add garlic and keep stirring until garlic is infused with the onion and leeks.

Add tomatoes, carrots and celery and cook for about 5 minutes, stirring.

Add broth and let cook (uncovered) for 45 minutes.

Add red beans, white beans, sausage and ground beef, and let cook for 15 minutes.

In a separate pot, boil water and make pasta according to package directions.

While the pasta is cooking, add the chopped basil, red pepper flakes and salt and pepper to taste and let the soup keep cooking.

Once pasta is cooked, drain it and add it to the soup pot.

Ladle the soup into bowls.

Sprinkle with freshly grated Parmesan cheese and drizzle with extra-virgin olive oil just before serving.

Note: If making soup the day ahead, then don't add any pasta.

Spaghetti Pie by Nancy Lauzon

This recipe originated from Weight Watchers. I ~~added more fat and carbs~~ tweaked it slightly, and now it's a favorite staple in my recipe arsenal. A great choice if you're looking for something different to bring to a pot luck dinner or outdoor picnic. One of my readers had a great suggestion: she freezes her Spaghetti Pie before baking, leaving off the Mozzarella cheese until she's ready to bake it. Always a good idea to have something ready in the freezer for unexpected company.

Ingredients:

2 cups cooked spaghetti – thin spaghetti or spaghettini works best

¼ cup Parmesan cheese

1 egg, beaten

1 Tbsp. margarine

2/3 cup ricotta cheese or cottage cheese

2 tsp. olive oil

½ diced onion
½ diced green pepper
1 garlic clove, minced
1 lb. lean ground beef
1 can diced tomatoes
1 Tbsp. tomato paste
1 cup shredded Mozzarella cheese

Directions:

Preheat oven to 350 degrees. Combine first 4 ingredients until gooey, and line a deep dish 9” pie plate along bottom and sides. Spread with ricotta cheese. Sauté onion, green pepper and garlic in olive oil. Add hamburger and cook until brown. Add tomatoes and tomato paste. Cook until thickened and heated. Spoon over ricotta cheese. Sprinkle with Mozzarella cheese. Bake for 20 – 25 minutes, or until golden on top.

Pork

Aunt Noony’s Afterglow Dinner for Two by A. Catherine Noon

Let’s face it. Sometimes, sexy is about the passion and the heat, but sometimes it’s about the intimate, slow and sensual moments that happen between two people in the quiet spaces. For those times, it’s nice to have a few meals in your basket of tricks that you can whip up quickly, but that bring the two of you closer together.

Ingredients:

2 pork chops, cut ¾ inch (2 cm) thick
1/3 cup long grain white rice
2 tablespoons chopped onion
1 cup chicken broth
1/2 cup chopped apple
1 tablespoon butter, melted
1 tablespoon brown sugar
1/4 teaspoon ground cinnamon (or, if you have it, cake spice)
1/2 cup sliced apples

Directions:

Trim the fat from the pork chops.

Cook the trimmings in a skillet until 2 tablespoons of fat accumulate; discard the trimmings.

I know, I know, pork fat isn't super healthy. If you really don't want to use it, then use olive oil.

I like using a CorningWare® pan, because it's safe to use on the stove and it has a lid that fits. It's deep enough that it can hold the entire recipe so I don't have to use a different pan for different things; though I will say I like using my cast iron skillet for the first step.

Slowly brown the chops in hot fat; remove chops.

In same skillet, cook the rice and onion until the rice is golden, stirring constantly.

Stir in the broth and bring to a boil.

Stir in the chopped apple.

My husband loves Granny Smith apples because they're tart; I like Gala apples because they're still tart but a little sweeter. I recommend using a tart apple because they hold their form during baking. Any apples you would use for an apple pie or tart are good here.

Turn the mixture into a 6.5 x 6.5 x 2 inch (16.5 x 16.5 x 5.08 cm) baking dish; arrange chops on top.

Bake, covered, in 350° F (177° C) oven for 30 minutes.

Meanwhile, combine the butter, sugar, and cinnamon or cake spice.

Brush the sliced apples with the mixture. Arrange around the chops.

I cheat here. Rather than just combining them in a bowl, I use a small cast iron skillet and melt the butter, then stir the spice into it. Once you've created a nice, well-blended butter and spice mixture, put the sliced apples into the skillet remove it from the heat. Stir the spiced butter over the apples, coating them completely. Then use a fork and arrange them over the pork, covering them in a thin layer. I then pour the remaining spiced butter over the pork and apples, drizzling all of it into the dish.

Bake, uncovered, about 20 minutes or until the apples and pork are tender.

Makes 2 servings.

The recipe can be doubled or quadrupled if you're feeding more than two people. It is good for leftovers.

Baby Got Back Ribs by Selena Robins

Meat-a-tarians love ribs. They're a sticky mess to eat at times, but the tender meat falling off the bones and the succulent sweet and tangy barbeque sauce that drips down one's fingers, making it finger lickin' good is a North American adventure.

I say North American, because to Italians (in Italy) the thought of eating meat slathered in any kind of sweetness is not something that they would consider—until they taste it and fall in love with anything related to BBQ sauce.

I know there are a ton of great barbeque rib recipes and you probably have your own great recipe is why I thought I'd provide you with an alternative to this popular dish.

Here's a recipe for luscious baby back ribs braised with tomato and fresh basil. If you have any leftover meat left over, you can throw it in the Sexy Sassy Sauce and use it as a pasta sauce.

Ingredients:

3 pounds of pork baby back ribs

3 TBSP extra virgin olive oil

4 garlic cloves (minced)

5 shallots (minced)

1 cup fresh basil (finely chopped)

4 sage leaves (finely chopped)

1/3 cup dry red wine (as I said in another recipe, if it's good enough to drink, it's good enough to use in cooking.)

2 cups canned whole peeled tomatoes with their juice (chopped into small pieces)

Sea Salt

Freshly Ground Black Pepper

Directions:

Heat oil over medium-high heat in a pan (a large enough pan that will accommodate the ribs snugly, if they overlap that's okay).

Once oil is heated, add the ribs and brown them on all sides.

Remove pan from the heat and season ribs with salt and pepper.

Add, garlic, shallots and sage and stir to coat all the ribs.

Put the pan on medium-high heat and add the wine.

Cook for one minute, allowing the alcohol to evaporate.

Add the canned tomatoes.

Season tomatoes with salt, stirring the tomatoes into the ribs.

Once tomatoes start to bubble, lower the heat to low.

Cover the pan with the lid slightly askew.

Cook the ribs for two and half hours, or until the ribs are very, very tender.

Turn ribs every twenty minutes.

If all the liquid in the pan evaporates before the ribs are ready, add some water.

If the sauce has too much liquid when the ribs are done, remove the cover, raise the heat to medium high until the sauce is reduced.

Once the ribs are tender and done, turn the heat off and sprinkle with fresh basil and let sit for 10 minutes with the lid on before serving.

Easy-Peasy Pork Tenderloin by Kimberley Troutte

A tasty meal that's easy to make is my mantra. I can't tell you how many times I've sat my desk and lost track of time. When I'm digging deeply into a new story, my fingers burn up the keys and the words fly. Inevitably, when my characters are on the brink of a discovery, or falling in love, or saving the world, a cry rings out:

"Mom! What's for dinner?"

Oh, shoot. It's getting late and my teenaged boys are hungry. Well, they're always hungry. Thank goodness, Pork Tenderloin is on the menu.

It's easy to prepare and can be cooking in the oven while my fingers are heating the keyboard. In the end characters on the page and at the table all fall in love.

Ingredients:

2 or 3 pounds pork tenderloin

1/2 cup soy sauce

1 tablespoon minced onion

1 large clove garlic, crushed

1 tablespoon vinegar

1/4 tsp black pepper

1/2 tsp sugar

Slice tenderloin into approx. 1/2" slices and place in a single layer in a large casserole dish. Pour remaining ingredients over meat. Bake at 300 degrees for 1 1/2 hours or until tender.

Serves 4-6.

Pork or Chicken Lo Mein by Denise Agnew

Chinese food can be great, but sometimes the restaurant kind is salty and full of MSG. It wasn't until I found this recipe that I was happy with home made.

Ingredients:

1/2 lb boneless pork loin (or equivalent amount chicken breast/chicken tenders)

2 ½ cups fresh sugar snap peas
1 ½ cups baby carrots cut lengthwise into ¼ inch strips
½ package (9 oz size) refrigerated linguine or spaghetti cut into two inch pieces
1 teaspoon low sodium soy sauce
2 teaspoons cornstarch
1 teaspoon sugar
2 teaspoons finely chopped gingerroot (or dried ginger)
2 to 4 cloves garlic, finely chopped
2 teaspoons canola oil
½ cup thinly sliced red onion
Sesame seeds if desired

Directions:

Cut pork or chicken into 2 to 1 inch strips.

Remove strings from pea pods.

In saucepan heat 2 quarts water to boiling.

Add pea pods, carrots and linguine/spaghetti.

Heat to boiling.

Boil for 2 to 3 minutes or just until linguine/spaghetti is tender.

Drain.

In small bowl mix broth, soy sauce, cornstarch, sugar, gingerroot and garlic. In skillet or wok heat oil over medium-high heat.

Add meat and onion.

Stir fry until meat is no longer pink.

Stir broth mixture, then mix it into pork mixture.

Stir in pea pods, carrots and linguine.

Cook 2 minutes, stirring occasionally. Sprinkle with sesame seed (optional).

Winter Stew for Four by A. Catherine Noon

Ingredients:

3 T olive oil
1 onion, chopped
1 chopped celery stalk
2 C chicken broth
1 1/2 C lentils, rinsed and picked over to remove any grit
1 bay leaf
1/2 pound kale
12 oz kielbasa or other garlic smoked cooked sausage
1 16-oz canned plum tomatoes, with their juice
2 t red wine vinegar
1/2 t salt
1/4 t black pepper

Directions:

Heat the oil in a large soup pot. Cook the onion and celery over medium heat until they begin to get soft and translucent.

Add 6 C of water and the broth, lentils, and bay leaf. Bring to a boil.

Lower the heat and simmer, partially covered, until the lentils are almost tender, which takes about 30 minutes.

While that's cooking, wash the kale. Discard the stems and tough ribs, then slice the leaves into thin strips.

Slice the sausage into 1/2 inch rounds.

Add the kale, sausage, and tomatoes with their juice to the soup. Bring to a simmer, breaking up the tomatoes with the side of a spoon.

Cook, uncovered, for 15 minutes longer.

If the soup is too thick, add up to 1 C or so more water. Stir in the vinegar and season with salt and pepper.

Vegetarian

Holy Hot Tamale Pie by Kimberley Troutte

I love tamales. Living in Southern California, I am fortunate to have several really good Mexican restaurants near me. I usually head down to one of these local restaurants or Mexican market to pre-order handmade tamales for our family Christmas meal. Yummy.

I have never tried my hand at making tamales myself, as my family is used to the good stuff, but I have made this wonderful tamale pie.

My mom gets the credit for this recipe. Enjoy!

Ingredients:

2 tablespoons oil
1/2 cup each, chopped onion, green and red pepper
1 jalapeño pepper, seeded and chopped
1 large clove garlic, chopped
1 tsp each, chili powder and salt
1/2 tsp each, paprika and ground cumin
1/4 tsp each, cayenne and black pepper
1 8oz can whole kernel corn, drained
2 cups each, milk and water
1 cup yellow cornmeal
1 cup shredded cheese (cheddar, Jack, Colby)
1/4 cup chopped cilantro for garnish

Directions:

In large pan, heat oil on medium heat. Sauté onions, peppers, jalapeno and garlic for 3 or 4 minutes. Stir in all seasonings, cook 1 minute. Add corn, milk and water and bring to a boil. Gradually, whisk in cornmeal and return to a boil. Cook over low heat, stirring occasionally for about 25 minutes. Pour into pie plate or other cooking dish. Cool completely. Sprinkle with cheese and bake 10-15 minutes at 400 degrees. Sprinkle with cilantro before serving.

Serves 4-6.

Lookin' Gouda in No Noodle Lasagna by Selena Robins

As an F.B.I. (full blooded Italian) you'd think that a lasagna recipe with no noodles would make you all think that I've lost my noodle (well, that's for another kind of book).

As someone who suffers from gluten intolerance, this recipe satisfies my lasagna craving. It's great for anyone cutting out carbs or has problems with gluten. It's also embraced by Italians in Italy, as it has two vegetables that are readily used in many dishes; eggplant and zucchini.

Ingredients:

2 large yellow (or green) zucchini (sliced lengthwise 1/4 inch thick)

2 medium-sized eggplants (peeled and sliced 1/4 inch thick)

2 cups ricotta cheese

1 1/2 cups gouda cheese

Sassy Sexy Sauce (or your own type of plain tomato sauce, and again, if you're in a rush and don't have any homemade tomato sauce on hand...deep breath here...you can use store bought jar sauce)

2 eggs slightly beaten (one egg will be for coating the zucchini)

2 TBSP chopped fresh parsley

4 TBSP chopped fresh basil

1 package frozen chopped spinach, thawed and drained well

Shredded mozzarella cheese

Grated Parmesan cheese

Flour (for coating the zucchini) (I use chickpea flour because of my gluten problem, you can use any type of flour)

Vegetable oil (to fry the zucchini)

Salt & Pepper to taste

Directions:

Pat zucchini and eggplant slices dry.

Add vegetable oil to pan and heat.

Coat zucchini slices first with flour then dip in egg, fry until golden brown, pat and put aside.

In a bowl, add: ricotta cheese, gouda cheese, chopped parsley, Parmesan cheese, spinach, one beaten egg, salt & pepper to taste and mix well together, put aside.

Heat the oven to 375F.

Lightly spray a baking dish with a non-stick spray.

Layer the baking dish as follows:

Zucchini

ricotta and gouda cheese mixture

eggplant

tomato sauce

sprinkle some fresh chopped basil on top of the sauce

sprinkle some mozzarella cheese on top (not too much, just about half a handful)

Repeat in the same order, except for the last layer, do not add any mozzarella.

Cover with aluminum foil and bake for 40 minutes.

Remove from oven and sprinkle mozzarella cheese on top.

Bake UN-covered for 10 minutes (or until all the cheese is melted and lightly browned)

Remove from oven.

Let sit for 15 minutes before serving.

Macaroni and Cheese by Nancy Lauzon

My grandmother, Abigail, was born early. She was so small that her father's wedding ring fit around her arm. The year was 1898. They kept her alive in the warming tray of an oven. A fitting place for her to begin her life, because she grew up to be a fabulous cook.

She made bread, rolls, tea biscuits, pies, squares and cookies. No bloody wonder I have a sweet tooth. She kept a bag of candy in her apron pockets. Mints, usually. White with spearmint centers or the large, round, pink ones. Or Chicken Bones—a candy popular on the Canadian East coast—pink on the outside with chocolate centers.

She taught me how to stack tea cups properly—a lost art, no doubt. She ate things nobody eats anymore—fried cheese or peas on toast. Her macaroni and cheese was simply that—macaroni with cheese, usually old, white cheddar, with a bit of milk added.

After I was married my husband insisted I add tomatoes to my grandmother's macaroni recipe, because that's the way his mother made it. I have to admit I like it better, so here it is. It's a great comfort food, and I've never met a kid who didn't like it.

Ingredients:

- 1 cup macaroni, cooked according to package directions
- 1 can diced tomatoes
- 2 tsp. dried basil
- 1 Tbsp. dried parsley
- 1 tsp. Worcestershire sauce
- 1 Tbsp. sugar
- Salt and pepper to taste
- 2 cups shredded cheddar cheese

Directions:

Preheat oven to 350 degrees. Grease a 2 quart casserole dish. Cook macaroni, drain, rinse and set aside. Meanwhile, heat canned tomatoes in a saucepan along with basil, parsley, Worcestershire sauce, sugar, salt and pepper. Bring to a boil and simmer about 5 minutes until heated through. Put half the cooked macaroni in the bottom of prepared casserole dish. Cover with half the tomato mixture and half the cheese. Repeat layers, ending with cheese. Bake for 30 minutes, or until bubbly and golden. Serves 4 – 6.

Sexy Sassy Sauce by Selena Robins

Note: You will want to make a big batch of this sauce, as you will read in the cook book where I contribute recipes, I mention using this sauce in a variety of dishes.

Why is this recipe sexy? Tomatoes are aphrodisiacs.

I'm not advocating you squish tomatoes all over yourself and meet your husband/wife at the door. Although, if that's your thing, I'm not judging.

Why is this recipe Sassy?

Because I needed another word that started with "S." Also, once you've eaten this sexy tomato sauce, you will self-sassify into one Sassy Chick or Chuck.

Nancy Lauzon is always telling me that when I share recipes with her, I don't put exact measurements. I have a good reason for this. I blame my mother. She taught me to cook without using a recipe book. However, for this cook book, I have provided exact measurements, (for the most part) with this recipe, but you don't need to follow exact measuring, seriously, it's that easy to make.

Why is this recipe Saucy?

That one's self-explanatory. It's a recipe for tomato sauce made the right way. By that I mean it's not store bought jar or canned sauce. If you're going to use ready-made tomato sauce, then please call it fake sauce.

Every time someone calls jar sauce, Italian Spaghetti sauce, an Italian Angel has to eat a slice of Devil's Food cake.

My people from the motherland yell (complete with hand gestures), "Mamma Mia! No! Please! No cans!" I know, this may sound melodramatic, but have you ever witnessed an Italian mamma in a grocery store when she spots shoppers slip a jar of—insert name of any store-bought sauce—into a shopping cart? It can get real ugly.

Tomato sauce (or gravy as it's called in Italy) can be made many ways. Every village, town and city in Italy has their own version. Actually, every household has their own recipe.

This is one of mine.

To my sister, if you're reading this—yes, mine is better than yours. Our sibling cooking rivalry will never end. But I do love her (I just love my way of making gravy better than her way.)

Ingredients:

20 Fresh Tomatoes: So fresh, you're going to want to smack them.

2 Yellow Zucchini: You can use green, if you can't find yellow.

1 Head of Roasted Garlic—Garlic will dilate blood vessels and improve circulation throughout the nether regions. It can also be a weapon of mass destruction and destroy a kissing session. However, roasting garlic takes the sting out of its destructive properties.

1 Sweet Red Pepper

1 Sweet Yellow Pepper

1 Big Bunch of Fresh Basil—Please do NOT use a dry herb.

Extra-Virgin Olive Oil

1/4 cup Red Wine: Use good dry wine, if it's good enough for you to drink then it's perfect for you to cook with. I also recommend drinking a glass while you're cooking, it will enhance the cooking experience.

Note: Kids can eat this sauce, the alcohol in the wine evaporates in the cooking process.

1/4 cup Milk: For the love of all that is good and Italian please, DO. NOT. EVER. put sugar in tomato sauce. I have no idea who started this rumor, but it must be stopped here and now. Add a little milk to the sauce to decrease the tomato's acidity.

Kosher Salt

Directions:

Pre-heat oven to 425.

Roast a head of garlic. When done, squeeze the roasted garlic in a bowl add some extra-virgin olive oil to the garlic, mix well and set aside.

Wash and dry vegetables (including the basil, dry each leaf after washing).

Chop the basil finely and set aside in a bowl. (I love a lot of basil, but you add as much as you like.)

Cut vegetables in bite size pieces.

Arrange the cut vegetables on a baking sheet.

Spray vegetables with olive oil and sprinkle some Kosher salt over vegetables.

Place the vegetables in the oven and let them roast for about 15 – 20 minutes (until all vegetables are roasted, but not charred).

Once vegetables are all roasted, take them out of the oven and put all the roasted vegetables in a food processor and whiz them until they are smooth.

In a heavy pot, coat the bottom of the pot with some olive oil and heat up.

Pour the sauce into the pot.

Add 1/2 the basil and the milk and stir well.

Cook on medium low for about 20 minutes.

Add the wine and stir. At this point, taste to see if you need more salt, if so, add more salt.

Cover halfway, letting the steam escape for a two to two and half hours – tasting it will let you know if the tomatoes are cooked and all the ingredients have married well together.

Once it's cooked, remove from the stove, wait five minutes and stir in the rest of the fresh basil.

This sauce tastes better the second day, but still good same day.

CHAPTER TWO (Beverages)

Chocolate Drinks

Ambrosia by A. Catherine Noon

Unlike coffee or tea, Ambrosia combines the effects of both and adds the bliss of chocolate. One cup will open your mind and awaken your senses for whatever you desire, sexy, sweet, or serious.

Ingredients:

- 1 part high quality brewed coffee (or, even better, make it in a French press)
- 1 part high quality black or green tea (Dragonwell is an excellent choice)
- 1 part high quality hot cocoa (Valhrona is my personal favorite; Vosges is a close second)

Directions:

Combine in a tea pot and whisk briskly for thirty seconds. Serve hot with a dash of cream and sugar.

I found this recipe in the Herbal Studies Course by Jeanne Rose, called the Cosmic Caffeinator. I have made it many times and the darker the cocoa, the better the results. As with everything, the quality of the ingredients makes a difference. But it's well worth trying, even if all you have at hand is office coffee, black orange pekoe teabags and hot chocolate. But making it with "the real deal" will show you why I call it Ambrosia.

If you have any interest in herbalism at all, Ms. Rose is the best source of information, bar none. Her sense of humor and wealth of knowledge are vast and she's written extensively on both herbalism and aromatherapy, as well as other topics. You can find out more about Ms. Rose, her books and classes, at her website.

Be the Barista in your Kitchen-Mochas by Kimberley Troutte

I love chocolate. Deep, melting all the way to my toes love. Dark chocolate just seems to make everything better. Add espresso coffee and steamed milk and you've got a mocha-love, or what I like to call a cup of joy on a cold day.

But wait, you don't have an espresso machine? No worries, with this recipe you don't need one.

Ingredients:

2 cups fat-free milk
1 1/3 cups strong brewed dark roast coffee
1/4 cup chocolate syrup
4 tsp sugar (or Splenda equivalent)
1/2 cup whipped topping
1/4 tsp unsweetened cocoa powder

Directions:

Heat the milk in a saucepan over medium heat until warm. Do not boil. Pour milk into blender on high speed for one minute until foamy. Fill four coffee mugs with about 1/3 cup of hot coffee. Stir one tsp. of sugar (or Splenda equivalent) and one tsp. of chocolate syrup into each coffee mug. Pour 1/2 cup of foamy steamed milk into the coffees but do not stir. Top with a dollop of whipped topping and sprinkle on cocoa powder.

Serves 4

Hot Chocolate Mix by Renee Wildes

Kids love this stuff—and it's easy for everyone to just help themselves whenever the mood strikes. Whenever the kids bring a friend over to our house, it's a good after-school treat. I like the spiced version myself. For a non-kids step-up, you can doctor with a shot of Baileys or Kahlua, too! (Great for bribing Santa, if it so happens you've been extra naughty this year...)

This makes a big batch!

Ingredients:

1 2 lb. can cocoa mix
1 8-qt. size powdered milk
1 8-oz, jar powdered cream
1-1/2 cups powdered sugar

Directions:

Mix together thoroughly in large pail –a flour sifter can help blend. Keep in sealed, airtight container.

To make, fill cup or mug ½ full of mix, add boiling water & stir well. Top with marshmallows.

To make SPICED HOT CHOCOLATE, sprinkle powdered cinnamon or nutmeg or a bit of ground cloves atop mix just before adding water.

Mexican Hot Chocolate by Kimberley Troutte

Have I mentioned that I love chocolate? The darker the better. Eat it, drink it, dip pastries in, it's all good for me. A few years ago, I tried hot chocolate at one of my favorite Mexican restaurants and was pleasantly surprised.

The drink I enjoyed as a kid suddenly has a kick.

Ingredients:

1/2 cup sugar
1/4 cup unsweetened baking cocoa
1/3 cup hot water
4 cups milk
3/4 tsp. vanilla extract
1 tsp cinnamon
Dash of cloves or ground nutmeg
A pinch of chili powder
Whipped Cream

Directions:

Cook sugar, cocoa and water on medium heat until it boils. Stir and boil for 2 minutes. Stir in milk but do not boil. Remove from heat and add vanilla, cinnamon, cloves (or nutmeg) and chili powder. Serve in mug adding a dollop of whipped cream.

Serves 3-4

Ciders

Spiced Apple Cider at the Theater by Kimberley Troutte

I've always enjoyed hot apple cider on a chilly winter morning but my favorite place to drink the sweet, warm goodness is at night in the summertime. A local theater company performs spectacular shows each summer. All year I look forward to the weeks when the theater comes to town. I can't wait to grab hubby and a few friends and head over to the Greek-style outdoor venue. With stars overhead and a few swooping bats, we cuddle up under blankets and watch the show.

It reminds me of high school when Kimberley Troutte was singing and dancing on stage. In those ancient times, cough-nearly thirty years-cough, I dreamed of being a pop star. I wrote a few original songs and sang them in the shower. My high school was the place to be if you had star-like ambitions. It was loaded with talent. Graduates have won Tony and Emmy Awards, ignited the silver screen and television shows, graced covers of Sports Illustrated, and toured in rock bands. I had a few onstage solos myself, but I was a better writer than vocalist. All that poetry and song-writing was simply foundation for my true calling. Now my voice flows onto the page.

Still, I do enjoy watching others who are great on stage. Sipping hot apple cider during intermission at the local theater is a part of the experience for me. It's sweet all the way around. Try adding a slice of lemon and a cinnamon stick to make this sweet drink rock.

Ingredients:

1/2 gallon apple cider
12 cloves
1 tsp. whole spice
2 tsp. ground cinnamon
1 c. orange juice
1/4 cup brown sugar (can be omitted)
lemon slices
cinnamon sticks

Directions:

Heat apple cider. Add all ingredients. Allow the mixture to simmer for half hour or more. Serve in mugs, garnishing with lemon slices and cinnamon sticks.

Makes 12 servings.

Spiced Cider by Renee Wildes

Perfect for Thanksgiving—or sledding parties. Especially good whenever you get a bunch of people who want to warm up their fingers. Also works well in a crockpot!

Ingredients:

1 gallon apple cider
1 quart cranberry juice
1 cup brown sugar
4-5 cinnamon sticks
1 tsp. cloves

Directions:

In large pot, simmer together on stove until just simmering. Serve hot.

Cocktails

Best Sex on the Beach by Nancy Lauzon

This drink was featured in my first novel, *Gone Groom Gone – a Chick Dick Mystery*. There are a million ways to make this cocktail, but this is one of my favorite recipes:

Ingredients:

1 ½ oz. vodka
½ oz. Peach Schnapps
2 oz. cranberry juice
2 oz. orange juice

Directions:

Add vodka and peach schnapps to a highball glass over ice. Fill with equal measures of cranberry juice and orange juice, and stir.

Homemade Irish Cream Liquor by Renee Wildes

Yum. 'Nough said. The original recipe says this will last TWO weeks, but I get nervous with raw eggs –and have NEVER had it last long enough to be an issue, anyway... I like to use Irish Mist whiskey liquor, but be warned it's presweetened, which might put this over-the-top for some people. But I'm a dessert-drink-after-dinner kinda gal so there ya go...

Ingredients:

1 14 oz. can condensed milk
1 pint half-and-half
1 cup Irish whiskey
3 whole eggs, well-beaten
1 tsp. vanilla
1 tsp. chocolate syrup

Directions:

Put all the ingredients in a blender and blend on medium until smooth and creamy. The eggs will make it slightly frothy. Chill in fridge in a clean, airtight container. Serve straight up or over ice. Can be stored for up to a week.

Just Peachy Sangria by Nancy Lauzon

I serve this at my annual summer barbeque party. It's refreshing and different, because it's made with white wine.

Ingredients:

1 bottle of white wine (Riesling, Pinot Grigio, Chablis, Chardonnay, or Sauvignon Blanc, whichever is your favorite)
½ cup Peach Schnapps
¼ to ½ cup sugar (depending on how sweet you like your sangria)
2 sliced peaches (frozen peach slices work well)
1 sliced orange
½ mango peeled and diced
½ large bottle ginger ale or club soda

Directions:

Pour wine and Schnapps in the pitcher and add sliced peach, orange and mango. Next add sugar and stir gently. Chill mixture for at least one hour. Add ginger ale or club soda just before serving.

If you'd like to serve your Sangria right away, use chilled white wine and ginger ale and serve over lots of ice.

Additional ideas: sliced strawberries, fresh raspberries, kiwi slices, a shot or two of Triple Sec, a cup of citrus soda pop.

Summer of Love Cocktail by Nancy Lauzon

I was invited to a beach party rather last minute, so I came up with this little cocktail based on what I had on hand in my kitchen. You might be asking why I keep booze in my kitchen. Technically, I keep my liqueurs on the sideboard in the dining room, but it's very close to my kitchen. I had some pink lemonade in the fridge, and I keep my vodka in the freezer. A Russian friend told me to. Of course, she also said that in Russia storing vodka isn't usually a problem, since vodka lovers in her country generally finish off the bottle the same day they open it.

Na zda rov ye! (To our health!)

Ingredients:

1 oz. citrus vodka
1 oz. Peach Schnapps
1 oz. Triple Sec
6 oz. pink lemonade

Directions:

Shake all ingredients in a cocktail shaker over ice. Top with extra juice if desired.

The Grateful Dead by Nancy Lauzon

This recipe was featured at the March 2012 launch party of *A Few Dead Men – a Chick Dick Mystery*. It's a killer drink, but if you drink too many, you might not be that grateful in the morning.

Ingredients:

1 part tequila
1 part vodka
1 part light rum
1 part gin
1 part Chambord raspberry liqueur

Directions:

Shake ingredients in a cocktail shaker, pour over ice in a Collins glass, and serve.

Yummy Rummy Cocktail by Nancy Lauzon

A friend of mine loves rum cocktails. He got this recipe from a hotel bartender, and after some experimentation, this is what he came up with:

Ingredients:

Ice
Shot of grenadine
1 oz. white rum
1 oz. dark rum
3 oz. orange juice
3 oz. pineapple juice
Shot of Myers or Malibu coconut rum
Straw

Directions:

Take a highball glass and pour in enough grenadine to cover the bottom of the glass. To a cocktail shaker, add ice, white rum, dark rum, orange and pineapple juice. Shake then pour into the glass with the grenadine. Pour a shot of coconut rum over the top. Serve with a straw.

Important note: You must drink this with a straw. If you drink directly from the glass the only thing you'll get is a mouthful of coconut rum. Not that that's a bad thing. Also, you can adjust the amounts of orange and pineapple juice to taste.

Coffees and Teas

Erin's Spiced Tea by Kimberley Troutte

Erin Carter, the heroine in *Catch Me in Castile*, bonded with her hero, Santiago, over favorite drinks that their mothers made them when they were kids. Santiago treated her to his mother's chocolate—a thick, hot chocolate that resembled warm pudding and was perfect for dipping pastries into.

Erin told him about a spiced tea that her mother made and promised to serve it for him one day. Hmmm, maybe in the next book. You can try this spiced tea before Santiago does.

By the way, my mom used to make this tea for me too. The colorful layers remind me of sand art. It makes for beautiful and tasty gift to give to friends.

Ingredients:

2 cups orange-flavored drink mix (My mom used Tang.)

2 cups white sugar

1/4 cup instant tea powder

3/4 cup lemon-flavored instant tea powder

2 teaspoons ground cinnamon

1 teaspoon ground cloves

Directions:

In a large bowl, combine all. Mix well and pour into a glass jar that has a screw on lid.

To serve, put 3 teaspoons of mix in a mug. Stir in 1 cup boiling water. Adjust to taste.

How to Make Good Coffee by A. Catherine Noon

Good coffee is simple to make but takes preparation. Two things are required: equipment and beans.

First, the equipment:

For the best coffee, in my opinion, try a French press. They're not hard to find; look in the house wares section of any large store or in specialty cooking shops. They do break after a while (I've had three and the part that holds the screen down tends to weaken over time), so don't feel like you have to buy the most fancy one out there.

A French press is simply a glass jar with a presser bar that has a circular metal flange, a screen and some kind of round press thingie (where it gets its name from, I suppose). When you buy it, take the lid apart. Unscrew the screen assembly from the center pole and pull it apart into its three pieces—but make sure you know what order to reassemble it. Wash everything in hot soapy water. If you buy one that can go in a dishwasher, and you have a dishwasher, run it through to sterilize it.

As for your beans, my favorites are Jamaican Blue Mountain and the New Mexico Piñon Coffee Company. Jamaican Blue Mountain is very expensive (if it's cheap, don't buy it because it's not the real thing) but I recommend going to a specialty shop and trying some. It's lovely stuff. Much more affordable is the New Mexico Piñon Coffee Company and their coffees are pure heaven; my favorite is their Chocolate Piñon whole bean. You can sometimes find it ground in canisters at Trader Joe's; I usually buy it by the bag directly from the company.

http://www.nmpinoncoffee.com/npc_shop/detail.asp?dept_id=1&pf_id=NMP12

The advantage to using whole beans is that they stay fresh longer. There's a lot of debate about how to store the beans; do you put them in the freezer? Cabinet? Fridge? I store mine in the freezer. End of debate. (See how easy that was?) The theory is this: the oils in the beans will get stale and, over time, rancid; storing them in the freezer prevents this and keeps them fresh.

Grinders aren't pricey; you can find good Krups grinders for about USD \$20 in stores and on the internet. That's what I like to use, but you might prefer the ease of ground beans. If you're lucky enough to find a local store that carries them, you can buy them whole and grind them at the store. If not, the company will sell you ground beans.

How much do you use? That depends on your French press. I like the large presses; the biggest one I've had holds about 3 cups of coffee. Figure about a tablespoon-ish of beans per cup plus a tablespoon. (This is strong, granted; if you don't like it that strong then use fewer beans.) Put the beans in the grinder and count to thirteen (you know, one-one-thousand, two-one-thousand, three-one-thousand, etc.) while pressing the "grind" button.

Once you have your grounds, put them into the glass container of the press and pour boiling water over them. Fit the lid over the top but don't press down yet. The purpose of the press is to move the grounds away from the liquid you drink; you want to let it steep first. Figure 3 to 5 minutes; I usually go by the color of the liquid. I like it dark.

A word to the wise: the coffee becomes more caffeinated the longer the grounds are in the water. Just because you've pushed them to the bottom doesn't mean the coffee has stopped brewing. If you drink the dregs, you will be super-charged with caffeine. (Ask me how I know this? I had the misfortune of finding it out the hard way, in a meeting. One of my colleagues looked at me quizzically and asked me, "Have you had a lot of coffee today?" Since I always drink a lot of coffee, this was saying something.

How to Make Okay Coffee

Making okay coffee is more about the equipment than the beans, though the beans factor into it. I'm going to assume you have good beans and go from there. My favorite beans are listed above; that leaves equipment.

The American traditional way of making coffee is to use a drip percolator. This puts hot water through the grounds and collects them in a pot on a burner that keeps the coffee warm.

The burner is the problem. The electrical unit that controls the burner tends to burn hot and, over time, gets hotter and loses its calibration. It tends to boil the coffee and one NEVER boils coffee. That burns it. That's why a lot of percolator coffee tastes burnt; it is.

If you have a percolator, clean it thoroughly. Put about a quarter cup of distilled vinegar in a pot and fill the rest with water, then pour that into the reservoir and brew. This will clean out all the old oil from the machine. Run a plain water pot after that to clear out the vinegar taste. Wash everything well with hot, soapy water and rinse thoroughly. If your percolator is old and has coffee smudge burnt to the burner, consider buying a new one. They don't cost a ton of money and will make up for the expense in the good coffee you can then make.

Use unbleached filters or, for you environmentally-inclined folks, get a reusable cloth filter basket. Always use a clean filter for a fresh pot and don't reuse grounds.

Used grounds are great compost and, I'm told, roses love them. (I don't grow roses so I can't attest to that, but I have horticultural friends that swear by it.)

Use fresh COLD water when you brew a new pot of coffee. I know some books get really picky about the kind of water you use, but I am not a purist. Use water you'd drink in a glass. ~shrug~

Any Coffee Is Better Than No Coffee – what to do when you can't take the time but need the coffee.

Instant isn't all bad. We went on a dogsledding trip a few years ago and that's what we had to drink; it's not boiled socks. You don't have to spring for Starbucks Via, either; regular instant is just fine.

You can, in a pinch, brew coffee in a mug if you have to. Take a heaping teaspoon of fresh grounds and put them in your cup, then pour boiling water over them. Let them settle and sip slowly (don't slurp, or you'll get a mouthful of grounds). This isn't all that dissimilar to making Turkish coffee and they know how to make good, strong coffee.

You can make coffee ahead and refrigerate it, if you have to. I'm not a huge fan of re-heated coffee, but it does re-heat in the microwave. You could make it the night before and take it in a thermos to work if you had to and really couldn't take the time in the morning to brew fresh.

Worst case scenario, buy it. Search out the good coffee places in your neighborhood, and don't just go to the chain stores. Small, locally-owned coffee houses struggle against the corporate giants. If you're going to spend your money on coffee that someone else makes for you, why not make your dollars count and support the local economy?

Don't Like Coffee? Tea Is the Beverage of Choice Around the World

Real tea is from the tea plant, *Camellia sinensis*. Black tea, as Americans are familiar with it, is fermented; green tea is the same plant just not fermented. There's a lot of variation in the tea world, so if this is your passion, research pays off. This is the simple, down-and-dirty version of how to make it rather than an in-depth discussion, which I don't have space for.

As with coffee, the important part with tea is to get good stuff. My personal favorite is Dragonwell green tea. You can find it at specialty tea shops; I recommend trying it. Loose leaf tea is always better than tea in bags, because it's fresher and you can see the product. The stuff in the bags is more appropriately called "tea dust," since it's usually dried out, stale, and broken into tiny pieces. Whole leaf is better quality, fresher, and frankly makes a better cup of tea.

There are a lot of really neat pieces of equipment you can get to make tea, up to and including the famous Japanese Tea Ceremony. Simply put, you need something to hold the leaves in the water while the water brews, and something to remove the leaves from the water or, at the least, keep them out of the way while you drink it.

I've used tea balls, strainers, fancy tea bowls; all sorts of things. Here's a suggestion: if you have guests and want to make a big pot of tea, put the tea in the percolator basket of your coffee maker and brew the tea that way. It makes a good, strong pot of tea and keeps the leaves in a neat package so there's little mess.

Traditionally there are two steps to brewing tea: the kettle; wherein you boil the water, and the pot; wherein you brew the tea. You don't want to boil the leaves in the water, you want to infuse them in boiled water. The difference is that to boil them in the water makes a much stronger liquid and can burn the leaves. Boil the water in the kettle and then pour the boiled water over the leaves in your teapot or mug and let it steep for 3 to 5 minutes.

I read once that one shouldn't squeeze the leaves when removing them, or it makes the tea bitter. I haven't found that to be true, but share it here in case your taste buds notice a difference.

If you haven't tried the wide world of herbal teas, I invite you to a taste extravaganza. There are as many different beverages to choose from as any gourmand would want. My favorites are hibiscus blends, which taste like fruit juice; and vanilla blends, which are thick and taste a little like hot chocolate.

Iced Coffee by Denise Agnew

Delish coffee! That's all I can say.

Ingredients:

¼ cup freshly brewed coffee
¼ cup light milk (1 or 2 percent)
¼ cup light cream
1 cup of ice cubes
2 teaspoons chocolate milk powder
1 packet of your favorite sweetener

Directions:

Blend and drink. It's that simple. As an alteration, I've also added a scoop of chocolate ice cream to this to really make a chocolate blend. You may want to alter the amounts of each ingredient to your taste buds.

Maddie's Iced Tea by Selena Robins

In my contemporary novel, *What a Girl Wants*, the heroine, Maddie Saunders has a special iced tea that she has concocted and loves to drink. A lot. Makes her go to the ladies room, but hey, it's

okay for a heroine to visit the loo, after all, it takes her out of the scene so things can happen without her knowing.

Here is Maddie's recipe for her special iced tea, make up a batch and let your taste buds in on the magic they will experience with this refreshing drink.

Ingredients:

4 cups water
2 Earl Gray tea bags
2 green Tea Bags
1 cup cranberry Juice
a handful fresh mint
pure honey to taste
fresh lemon

Directions:

Bring water to a boil and pour in large pitcher, add the tea bags and let stew.

Remove tea bags and add: cranberry juice, honey, juice from the lemon, mint leaves.

Store in fridge for an hour.

Punches

New Twist on Lemonade by Selena Robins

Lemonade is one of those timeless drinks that everyone seems to enjoy. Spiked or non-alcoholic, it's refreshing to drink. Here is a new twist on an old favorite, and I'm using sherbet in this recipe as well. Sherbet is my go-to addition to a lot of drink recipes, it just goes down so smooth.

Ingredients:

3/4 cup sugar
simple syrup (see instructions below)
the juice of 6 fresh lemons (enough to make 1 cup juice)

4 cups cold water
lemon sherbet
lime sherbet
fresh strawberries

Directions:

Simple Syrup

Make simple syrup by heating 1 cup of water and the sugar in a small saucepan until the sugar is dissolved completely. After sugar is completely dissolved, let it cool (not in the fridge, on the counter).

Extract the juice from 6 lemons, enough for one cup of juice.

Add the juice and the simple syrup into to a pitcher with some ice and freshly washed strawberries.

Add 4 cups of cold water

Refrigerate 30 minutes (or longer)

When serving, add a 1 TBSP of lemon sherbet and 1 TBSP of lime sherbet in a tall glass, add lemonade.

Serve over ice with a slice of lemon.

Pippy's Flying Angel Punch by Selena Robins

Aside from dancing with my dog and singing into my hairbrush, and writing contemporary romances, I also wrote a children's book, *Pippy's Wish*, under the pen name, Maddie Ryan. At the end of Pippy's book, I've included a few recipes, appropriate for children and adults.

One of the recipes is Pippy's Flying Angel Punch. However, this version of Pippy's Punch that I am going to share in this cookbook is for adults only.

Ingredients:

3 oz. pineapple juice
3 oz. unsweetened orange juice
1 oz. vodka
1 oz. rum
1 splash Sprite soda
1 oz. orange sherbet
1 oz. lemon sherbet
1 orange, peeled and sliced
Fresh mint leaves
Ice cubes

Directions:

In a shaker with ice, pour everything except the sherbets.

In a tall glass, add the sherbets, then pour the drink mixture into the glass.

Sparkling Punch by Denise Agnew

When I was a kid my mother would make a sparkling punch recipe for Christmas or New Years. This recipe is similar to what she made.

Ingredients:

1 liter ginger ale (or lemon/lime soda)
1 liter club soda
1 bottles sparkling apple cider or berry soda pop
2 trays of ice cubes

Directions:

If you don't want to use a punch bowl for this, just divvy up equal amounts of ginger ale, club soda, apple cider and ice in a glass, stir and you're ready to go.

Sparkling Red Velvet Punch by Renee Wildes

This is so pretty, and especially good for Valentine's Day or any "girlie" gatherings. Wisconsin is home to a big Ocean Spray facility in Tomah (where my husband's from), so we consider this a "down-home" kinda drink, too.

Ingredients:

large punch bowl

2-1/2 qt. chilled 7-Up or Sprite

3 cups cranberry juice

1 3-oz. pkg. cranberry gelatin powder

3 Tbsp. lemon juice

ice cubes (for more festive look, freeze sliced fruit with water in shaped "ice molds" & substitute)

Directions:

Heat cranberry juice in sauce pan. Slowly add gelatin, stirring constantly, until gelatin is thoroughly melted. Add lemon juice. Allow to cool. Pour in punch bowl. Add soda and ice.

Witch's Brew by Denise Agnew

I found this recipe about ten years ago, and I have it every year on Halloween (Samhain) almost without fail. There are many recipes for Witch's Brew, and this is just one of them.

Ingredients:

4 cups red berry juice (I use cranberry)

4 cups (1 liter) orange juice

1/4 cup lemon juice

8 cups apple cider

1 cup water

1 cup white grape juice

1 1/2 teaspoon ground cinnamon

On the night before serving, pour the berry drink into ice trays (about three ice trays). The next day mix orange, lemon, apple cider, water, grape juice and cinnamon together until well blended. Chill in refrigerator for at least an hour before serving. When ready to serve, pour over frozen

berry cubes and enjoy. I've made some variations on this recipe before. I've spiked it with a cup of red wine (whatever type you prefer) and only used 3 cups of cranberry.

Smoothies and Slushes

Antioxidant Prickly Pears by Selena Robins

In spite of the fact that I fell into a cactus plant and had the cactus' little pricks lodged into my backside, and enduring one of many embarrassing moments in my journey through life, I love the taste of prickly pears. Not only are they yummy, but they have the added bonus of being chock full of antioxidants.

Prickly Pear Smoothies are delicious, refreshing and if you want to add an extra kick to your smoothie, add a splash (or two) of vodka or gin.

To read about my adventures in Arizona and how I landed on my butt, please visit this blog post: <http://selenarobinsmusings.com/2012/08/27/antioxidant-little-pricks/>

Prickly Pear Smoothie

Ingredients:

1 Banana, cut in half
2 Prickly Cactus Pears, peeled and chopped
1/2 cup orange juice
1 cup water
1/2 pint frozen vanilla yogurt
1 cup of ice cubes

Directions:

Put the banana, cactus pears and orange juice in a blender and puree.

Then add the frozen yogurt, water, ice cubes and blend until smooth.

Most prickly pears you buy in the store will already have the spines removed, but in case they don't, here is a link that will explain how to do it. <http://www.wikihow.com/How-to-Eat-Prickly-Pear-Cactus>

Apricot Brandy Slush by Renee Wildes

Brandy slush is a Christmas staple at my mother-in-law's. Kids are always begging but forbidden. It was a big deal when my oldest son and nephews turned "of age" and got to join the adults in a toast. Not enough to get schnockered, unless you hog the whole batch to yourself, but really good.

Ingredients:

large ice cream bucket with lid

4 green tea bags

3 cups boiling water

1-1/2 cups sugar

12 oz. frozen lemonade

12 oz. frozen orange juice

2 cups apricot brandy

7-Up or Sprite

Directions:

Put all tea bags in 2 CUPS boiling water, steep until desired strength. Remove tea bags & dilute with final cup boiling water. To tea add sugar, frozen lemonade & frozen orange juice, and the brandy. Mix together & freeze in plastic bucket.

To serve, use ice cream scoop to scoop out into glasses until approximately 1/3-1/2 full, top with 7-Up or Sprite.

Strawberry Slushies for the Kid in All of Us by Kimberley Troutte

My parents have a picture of me when I was about three years old. I'm standing on the front porch wearing my hot pink tights and multi-colored striped shirt with the humongous frilly bow at the collar (it was the sixties after all) and eating a strawberry bigger than my mouth.

It's crazy to think I went out in public dressed like that. These days, I only wear hot pink tights to yoga class.

I still adore strawberries, preferring those bigger than my mouth. Nothing says summer quite like Strawberry Slushies.

Ingredients:

12 ice cubes
About 2 cups of fresh (or one cup frozen) strawberries
1 cup of frozen limeade concentrate
1 cup of water

Directions:

Crush ice cubes in blender or food processor. Add the rest of the ingredients and purée until smooth and thick. Pour into tall glasses.

Serves 4

Whiskey Slush by Denise Agnew

At first thought I wondered, how good could something called whiskey slush be? Hell, its got whiskey? How could it not be good?

Ingredients:

7 cups water
½ to 1 cup of sugar depending on taste
2-4 teabags
1 12 oz can frozen lemonade
1 12 oz can orange juice
2 cups whiskey
7-Up, Sprite or ginger ale

Directions:

Bring water and sugar to a boil, then cool. While water is boiling steep 3 to 4 teabags in 2 cups of water and discard teabags. Mix lemonade, orange and 2 cups of whiskey together. Now combine all the ingredients and freeze. To serve: scoop slush mix into a glass and pour 7-Up, Sprite or ginger ale over the slush. Ah...good stuff!

HAPPY EVER AFTER (Desserts)

Cakes

Aunt Maxine's Applesauce Cake by Renee Wildes

Aunt Maxine is my husband Todd's aunt, She lives in Florida, so anytime Aunt Maxine comes up to Wisconsin to visit it's an occasion where the whole family gets together. It's kinda funny having a dessert with her name on it, because she's just about the itty-bittiest skinny Minnie you ever saw. She's a hoot. Wish we could see her more often. Tough when family's scattered all over creation.

Ingredients:

1-3/4 cups flour
1 cup white sugar
1 cup unsweetened applesauce
½ cup butter
1 egg
1 tsp. cinnamon
1 tsp. salt
1 tsp. baking soda
½ tsp. nutmeg
½ tsp. all-spice
¼ tsp. cloves

Directions:

Preheat oven to 350.

Grease & flour a 7 x 10 baking pan. In a large mixing bowl, cream butter & sugar together. Add egg & beat well. In a separate mixing bowl, add the dry ingredients together & mix well. Add ½ cup flour mixture to butter/sugar mixture; stir well. Add applesauce; mix well. Add in rest of flour mixture. Pour into baking pan & bake for approximately 45 minutes. Test center with toothpick for doneness.

Best Chocolate Cake Ever by A. Catherine Noon

The center of this cake is gooey and will seem to be underdone, but it's not. It's heaven. It is not, in any way, diet friendly. You will die happy.

Ingredients:

1/4 pound (1 stick) softened butter
1 1/2 cups blanched almonds or filberts
3/4 cup chocolate pieces or 4 oz semisweet chocolate
2/3 cup sugar
3 eggs
Grated rind of 1 large orange
1/4 cup very fine bread crumbs (about 1 slice firm white bread)

Directions:

Butter the bottom and sides of an 8 inch, 20 centimeter round cake pan.

Grind the nuts as fine as possible in a food processor or blender.

Melt the chocolate in a double boiler.

Cream the butter until very soft and light.

Add the sugar gradually, beating constantly. When all the sugar has been added, add the eggs, one at a time, beating well after each addition.

Stir in the melted chocolate, ground nuts, orange rind, and bread crumbs. Use a rubber spatula to stir well and clean the sides of the bowl.

Pour the batter into the pan and bake in a 375F, 191C oven for 25 minutes.

Cool on a rack for 30 minutes, then turn the cake onto a cake rack.

If you'd like to glaze it, here's a glaze recipe, but to be honest with you, I like the cake as-is.

Glaze

Combine 2 oz unsweetened chocolate, 1/4 C butter, and 2 t honey in the double boiler.

Let the mixture melt, then take it off the heat and beat until cold and the mixture begins to thicken.

Pour the glaze over the cake and voila. Heaven.

Caramel Praline Cheesecake by Nancy Lauzon

One of my favorite candies of all time—and I have a long list—is Kraft Caramels. Always special to find one in your pillow case at Halloween. Back in the day we didn't go trick or treating using fancy schmancy decorated Halloween pumpkins or plastic bags. We used pillow cases, preferably King-sized, for a larger candy haul.

Ingredients:

1 ¼ cups Graham cracker crumbs
¼ cup butter, melted
1 pkg. (10 oz.) Kraft Caramels, divided (or any brand of caramels)
¼ cup milk, divided
1 cup chopped pecans, divided
3 pkg. (8 oz. each) Philadelphia Cream Cheese, softened
¾ cup sugar
1 tsp. vanilla
3 eggs

Directions:

Heat oven to 350°F.

Mix Graham crumbs and butter; press onto bottom of 9-inch springform pan lined with parchment paper. Reserve 4 caramels, 1 tbsp. milk and ¼ cup nuts for later use.

Microwave remaining caramels and milk in microwaveable bowl on high for 1 ½ min, stirring after 45 sec. Stir until caramels are completely melted and mixture is well blended. Stir in remaining nuts; pour over crust.

Beat cream cheese, sugar and vanilla with mixer until well blended. Add eggs, 1 at a time, mixing on low speed after each just until blended. Pour over caramel mixture.

Bake 45 to 50 min. or until center is almost set. Run knife around rim of pan to loosen cake; cool before removing rim. Refrigerate 4 hours.

Microwave reserved caramels and milk in microwaveable bowl on high 30 sec; stir until smooth. Drizzle over cheesecake; top with reserved nuts.

Chocolate Mayo Cake by Selena Robins

Yes, you read that right: chocolate plus mayonnaise in a cake is a party for the tummy. Trust me. This cake will be a hit with you, your family and friends.

It's moist and chocolate-ilcious topped with Buttercream Frosting that will bring out the oohs-aahhs and award you with many compliments.

Ingredients:

2 cups all purpose flour
1 cup Real Mayonnaise
1 1/4 cup white sugar
1/2 tsp. vanilla
4 heaping TBSP cocoa powder
pinch of salt
2 tsp. baking soda
1 cup of boiling water
Fresh strawberries or fresh raspberries

Directions:

Preheat oven to 350 F.

Add baking soda in the boiling water.

Mix ALL the ingredients in one large bowl and mix well, until everything is incorporated

Spray 2 cake pans with non-stick spray

Pour batter equally in both pans

Bake for approximately 25 – 30 minutes (or until done)

Put on cake rack and let cool.

Chocolate Butter Cream Frosting

1/4 cup butter

3 cups confectioner's sugar

3 TBSP Cocoa Powder

1 tsp. vanilla

2 TBSP milk

Directions:

Mix together all ingredients.

You may need to add more milk (slowly) until frosting reaches a spreadable consistency.

Frost cake and decorate with fresh raspberries or strawberries.

Chocolate Peanut Butter Cake by A. Catherine Noon

Ingredients:

1 1/2 cup sugar

1/2 cup softened butter

1/3 cup chunky peanut butter

3 squares (3 oz) unsweetened chocolate, melted and cooled

2 eggs

1 1/2 t vanilla

2 1/2 cups all-purpose flour

2 1/2 t baking powder

1 2/3 cup milk

A word on ingredients: not all peanut butter and not all vanilla are created equally. First, the peanut butter: get organic. Peanuts are used as a resting crop on fields that grow cotton, one of the most highly toxic crops out there because it's not used for food. They douse those fields with an unimaginable chemical soup of pesticide and herbicide and all that poison leaches into the peanuts. Don't.Do.It. Use organic.

Even better, find a place in town that lets you grind your own peanut butter. Yum city. Whole Foods does it, as do smaller, locally-owned organic groceries. Use the latter when you can and support the local economy.

Vanilla is expensive. A blight in Madagascar a couple years ago decimated the crops and caused a shortage, so be prepared to pay for the good stuff. Under no circumstances should you settle for "vanilla flavor" or "Vanillin." These are chemical approximations of the real thing. It should say something like "100% vanilla extract." Vanilla comes from an orchid and is extracted in alcohol, usually a high-quality brandy. (If you can get your hands on real Madagascar pods, you can extract your own – swoon). Hunt around for it or go to The Spice House. They'll take care of you.

<http://www.thespicehouse.com/spices-by-category/vanilla>

Directions:

Grease and lightly flour a 13x9x2 inch, 33x23x5 centimeter baking pan.

Cream the sugar, butter and peanut butter until light and fluffy, scraping the bowl frequently.

Add the chocolate, eggs, and vanilla, beat at medium speed of electric mixer until light and fluffy, scraping bowl frequently.

Stir together flour, baking powder, and 1 t salt, add to creamed mixture alternately with milk, beating after each addition.

Turn into prepared pan.

Bake in 350 oven for 30 to 35 minutes or until a wooden pick inserted in center comes out clean.

Cool.

Serves 12 to 15.

It's My Birthday Chocolate Cake Kimberley Troutte

This recipe reminds me of my dad. He loves chocolate cake and this one is his favorite. More often than not, he'd request it for his birthday cake. Mom would make it for him and fill it full of love. After Dad blew out the candles, we all enjoyed the melty chocolate goodness. Mmmm.

Oh my gosh, I just had an epiphany! Could this be why I love chocolate so much? Because it makes me think of my dad, special times, and being loved? It's not a bad way to eat cake.

Ingredients:

1 package of dark chocolate cake mix

1 small package of instant pudding

8 oz. sour cream

1/2 cup warm water

1/2 cup oil

12 oz of semi-sweet chocolate chips

Mix all ingredients. Pour into a 9 x 13 non-stick pan. Bake for 1 hour at 350 degrees.

Rhubarb Cake by Renee Wildes

My husband Todd's late grandma Marlene Wilde put together a "family recipe" cookbook for all the grandkids one Christmas. It's a 3-ring binder entitled "Digging Around Among The Flours." Up here rhubarb is one of those plants that just takes off on its own and practically grows wild, so it's nothing to grab some and whip up a cake now and again. My kids like to munch on a stalk raw with a little salt, but I confess I'm not that hardcore. Every time I make it, I think of Grandma Wilde. She got a mention in the dedication of *DUALITY (Guardians of Light, Book 1)* for being one of my biggest cheerleaders. I still miss her.

Ingredients:

2 cups + 2 Tbsp. flour

1-1/2 cups diced rhubarb

1-1/2 cups brown sugar
1/2 cup butter
2 eggs
1 cup buttermilk
1 tsp. vanilla
1 tsp. baking soda
1 tsp. cinnamon
1/2 tsp. salt

Directions:

Preheat oven to 350.

Grease & flour a 9 x 13 pan. In one mixing bowl, cream butter & sugar together. Add eggs & vanilla; beat well. In a separate mixing bowl, sift flour, baking soda, cinnamon & salt together.

Alternate adding buttermilk & flour mixture to butter/sugar mixture—START & END WITH FLOUR. Add in the rhubarb & mix well.

Pour into greased/floured pan. Sprinkle topping across surface of cake batter. (See below) Bake for 45 minutes. Insert toothpick into center to see if done—should come out clean.

Topping:

Combine
3/4 cups brown sugar
1 Tbsp. flour
1 tsp. cinnamon

You Had Me at Chocolate Cheesecake by Kimberley Troutte

If you were visiting a foreign planet and could only bring one food item with you what would it be? That's an easy answer for me. Dark chocolate. It's full of antioxidants to keep me healthy, caffeine to keep me awake, and good stuff make me happy. If I could only bring a chocolate cheesecake to this planet, it would be this one.

I hope you enjoy it as much as I do.

Ingredients:

8 oz package of cream cheese, softened
1/2 cup of mayonnaise
1/2 cup of sugar
2 eggs
1 large package of chocolate chips, melted
1 tsp vanilla
1 chocolate flavored pre-made pie crust

Preheat oven to 350 degrees.

In a large bowl beat cream cheese and mayonnaise until smooth. Gradually beat in sugar and eggs one at a time. Add melted chocolate chips and vanilla until smooth. Pour into pie crust.

Bake for 30 - 35 minutes.

Chill for 4 hours before serving.

Candy

Spicy and Oh-So-Sweet Jalapeno Fudge by Kimberley Troutte

A couple of weeks before Halloween, I did something pretty stupid that we don't need to discuss at this juncture. Or ever. Suffice it to say that legs aren't supposed to bend the way I tried to make them go and I ended up with a torn calf muscle. The calf wasn't totally ripped in two and didn't require surgery (thank goodness) but it was enough of an injury to keep me bunged up and lying on the couch for a while.

My little boy wanted to make fudge for the Halloween school party all by himself. I let him do it, monitoring from the nearest couch. Wowza, his fudge was divine and it made me feel better.

I asked him if I could share his recipe in the cookbook and he flatly denied me. Me! His crippled-for-the-moment mother. Since he wanted to keep his recipe a secret, I searched the web and found another fudge recipe that is similar with a little more kick.

Ingredients:

3 cups sugar
¾ cups margarine
5 oz. evaporated milk
12 squares Baker's Semi-Sweet chocolate, chopped
7 oz. Puffed Marshmallow Cream
1 tsp of vanilla
5-10 pickled jalapeño pepper rings
1 tsp of cinnamon

Directions:

In blender, mix the jalapeño peppers until fine. Line a 9-inch square pan with foil.

In a large saucepan, bring sugar, butter and milk to full rolling boil on medium heat and keep boiling for 4 minutes while stirring constantly. Remove from heat and add chocolate and marshmallow crème, stir until melted. Stir in vanilla and jalapeño peppers. Pour into 9-inch pan. Sprinkle cinnamon across the top. Cut into squares once cooled.

Cookies

Coo-Coo for Oatmeal Cookies by Kimberley Troutte

Cooooiiiies!

I grew up watching Sesame Street. My favorite character wasn't Big Bird, Oscar the Grouch, or Elmo. It was the Cookie Monster, the mild-mannered monster who went a little coo-coo for cookies. I can still relate to that guy. Who doesn't love cookies? Eating chocolate chip cookies warm out of the oven ranks way up there on my favorite-things list. I might go a little coo-coo for one.

This recipe is the product of years of cookie tasting (a sacrifice I readily made for the betterment of mankind). The cookie dough is pretty awesome too.

Ingredients:

2 ¼ cups flour
1 tsp. baking soda
1 tsp. salt
1 cup butter (or margarine)
2 tsp. cinnamon

1 tablespoon vanilla extract (or imitation vanilla)
2 cups packed dark brown sugar
1 cup white sugar
2 large eggs (wash egg shells prior to use)
18 oz. semi-sweet chocolate chips
1 cup oatmeal
1 cup nuts (walnuts or pecans)

Directions:

Preheat: oven to 375 degrees

Combine: flour, baking soda, cinnamon and salt in a small bowl. Beat butter, sugar, and vanilla extract. Add two eggs to the sugar mixture (shells cleaned so that cookie dough is safe to eat), blending until smooth. Gradually beat in flour mixture. Transfer mixture to a larger bowl to add chocolate chips, oatmeal and nuts. Mix completely. Cook on a cookie sheet and bake for 9 to 11 minutes until golden brown.

Makes about 4 dozen.

Fry Pan Cookies by Selena Robins

This recipe comes from my mum-in-law's recipe book, which I had to Google the measurements to make it user friendly for all of us. She had this recipe since she was married in the U.K. and their measurements are a tad different than ours.

I have no idea why these cookies are called fry pan cookies, since you don't use a frying pan (has to be one of those in-law secret family quirks). Come to think of it, they aren't really cookies either since you roll them into little balls. It really doesn't matter, they are delicious and popping one in your mouth will satisfy the sweetest of any tooth and dessert lover.

Ingredients:

1/3 lb. unsalted butter
1 cup sugar
1 1/3 cups dates (firmly packed)
2 cups Rice Krispies
1 tsp. vanilla

1 package of small shredded coconut (if you're like me and are not a fan of coconut, you can roll them in confectioner's sugar instead)

Directions:

In a sauce pan add: butter, sugar and dates and bring to a boil.

Let boil while stirring constantly for five minutes.

Remove from heat and stir in the vanilla and Rice Krispies.

Let cool, long enough so that you can handle the mixture with your hands.

Form into little balls and roll the balls in coconut (or confectioner's sugar)

Makes approximately 45 cookies.

Peanut Butter Oatmeal Cookies by Denise Agnew

I have to admit that I love peanut butter. Not only do I like the taste, but it's a good, convenient protein hit when you need it. Add oatmeal and it just has a hardness I appreciate. There's nothing too healthy about this cookie, of course. Or it wouldn't be a real cookie, right?

Ingredients:

$\frac{3}{4}$ cup butter flavor shortening

1 cup peanut butter (I prefer smooth)

1 $\frac{1}{2}$ cups firmly packed brown sugar

$\frac{1}{2}$ cup water

1 egg

1 teaspoon vanilla extract

3 cups quick oats or old fashioned, uncooked (such as Quaker Oats)

1 $\frac{1}{2}$ cups all-purpose flour

$\frac{1}{2}$ teaspoon baking soda

Directions:

Beat together shortening, peanut butter and brown sugar. Slowly beat in water, egg and vanilla.

Add combined dry ingredients and mix well. Cover and chill about two hours. Heat oven to 350 degrees. Shape dough into 1 inch balls. Place on un-greased cookie sheet. Bake 9 to 11 minutes or until edges are golden brown. Cool 1 minute on cookie sheet and remove to wire rack. Cool completely and store tightly covered.

Makes about 7 dozen.

Snickerdoodle Cookies by Renee Wildes

These are my absolute all-time, favorite cookies in LIFE. Hands-down. I will take these over chocolate-chip. What's weird is up here, bakeries only make them over the Christmas season. I never considered them a Christmas cookie, but you can't get them year-round. Unless you make your own. I grew up with these—but we used to make “cookie balls” and ROLL them in the cinnamon & sugar. Was a fun family activity—great to do with kids.

Ingredients:

3-3/4 cups flour
2 cup sugar
1 cup chopped nuts
1 cup butter, softened
2 eggs
¼ cup milk
1 tsp. vanilla
½ tsp. baking soda
½ tsp. cream of tartar
½ tsp. salt

Directions:

Preheat oven to 375.

Grease cookie sheet.

In large mixing bowl, cream butter & sugar together.

Add in eggs one at a time, beating well between each. Blend in milk & vanilla.

In a separate mixing bowl, combine flour, baking soda, cream of tartar & salt. Add dry mixture to wet & stir thoroughly.

Add in nuts. Form dough into 1-inch balls and place on cookie sheet 2 inches apart. In a small bowl combine ½ c. white sugar & 1 Tbsp. cinnamon.

Wet the bottom of a glass with water, dip into cinnamon/sugar mixture & flatten each cookie —"reload" glass between cookies.

Bake 10-12 minutes.

Makes 8 dozen cookies.

Treadmill Cookies by Selena Robins

I named these oatmeal cookies with a twist (chocolate chips, butterscotch & peanut butter), Treadmill Cookies, because after you taste one, you'll want two, three or more.

Your taste buds will thank you, your thighs will extract revenge. But alas, there's always the treadmill to balance it all out.

Ingredients:

1 cup butter, room temperature

1 cup brown sugar

3/4 cup white sugar

2 eggs, well beaten

1 TBSP vanilla

1 1/2 cups flour

1 tsp salt

1 tsp baking soda

1 tsp cinnamon

1/2 tsp ginger

1/2 tsp nutmeg
3 cups oatmeal (old fashioned, not instant)
1/2 cup milk chocolate chips
1/2 cup butterscotch chips
1/2 cup peanut butter chips

Directions:

Preheat to 350 F.

Line a baking sheet with parchment paper.

Cream butter, brown and white sugars and vanilla extract together until mixture is creamy and smooth.

In a separate bowl combine until well blended, the following: flour, salt, baking soda, cinnamon, ginger & nutmeg.

Add the dry ingredients to the creamy mixture and mix well.

Add eggs to mixture and stir.

Add oatmeal and chocolate/butterscotch/peanut butter chips and combine all ingredients together. Be careful not to over-stir, as too much stirring in a cookie recipe can make cookies to become cakey.

Form mixture into balls and place on cookie sheet.

Bake 10 – 13 minutes (depends on your oven, so keep an eye on them).

Let cool on cookie sheet for 5 minutes.

Transfer onto a wire rack.

Fruit

Berry Parfait by A. Catherine Noon

I remember the first time I found out what a parfait is. I'd read of them in books, particularly period romances where the hero and heroine are at table and a confection of a dessert is served, a berry parfait, and it's all incredibly romantic. It sounded hard to make, too.

Nope.

Take some berries. Take some whipped cream. Take a tall, fluted glass of some kind (a parfait glass, even). Layer the berries, cream, berries, cream, berries, cream, and put a sprig of mint on top. Poof. Parfait.

Then along came Weight Watchers and whipped cream and I decided we weren't good for each other. No more parfait. Or was there?

Enter Greek yogurt, which I talked about above.

Using the yogurt in place of the cream, same thing. Layer berries or fruit (peaches and kiwi are lovely) and you have a parfait.

Dessert for Breakfast by Selena Robins

What better way to start your day than with dessert? Breakfast is the most important meal of the day, so we are told, so why not start it off with dessert? I know what you're thinking, that this is not a healthy example for your kids, but this recipe contains all the goodness and nutrition needed to kick-start their day. You have your protein (peanut butter & nuts), oatmeal (that doesn't look like gruel) fruit, sweetness that isn't white sugar, vitamin C and calcium.

Ingredients:

6 cups apples (peeled, cored, sliced)

3 cups frozen blueberries

½ cup peanut butter

½ cup nuts (almonds or walnuts) chopped

½ cup pure honey

juice of ½ lemon

juice of 1 orange

1 TBSP. cinnamon

1 tsp. nutmeg

1 cup rolled oats
pinch of salt
Non-stick spray

Directions:

Preheat oven to 375.

Spray deep baking dish with a non-stick spray.

In a small bowl, melt the honey and add the peanut butter to the honey and stir well to get a creamy mixture.

In a large bowl add: apples, $\frac{1}{2}$ TBSP cinnamon, $\frac{1}{2}$ tsp. nutmeg, the juice of the lemon, blueberries, honey-peanut butter mixture.

Toss this all together until evenly coated.

In another bowl add: rolled oats, pinch of salt, orange juice, almonds (or whatever nut you're using), $\frac{1}{2}$ TBSP cinnamon, $\frac{1}{2}$ tsp. nutmeg and mix well.

Put your apple mixture in a deep baking dish.

Spread the rolled oat mixture over the apples.

Bake for 35 minutes (or until apples are soft).

For breakfast: add a scoop in a bowl and add some warmed vanilla almond milk (or cow's milk, whatever your preference), or you could add some Greek yogurt or any other kind of yogurt.

For dessert: add ice-cream or frozen yogurt.

How to Make Good Fruit Salad by A. Catherine Noon

Making a good fruit salad is surprisingly easy, but I'm surprised when friends don't know how to do it. So here, once and for all, is Aunt Noony's Lecture on Fruit (and not the stuff in a can):

Making fruit salad starts with fresh fruit. In a pinch you can use fresh frozen fruit, but don't get that crap out of a can that's soaked in syrup, which just adds a bunch of useless calories to your ass and no real flavor or benefit that fresh fruit can't beat. Here's what I like in my fruit salad:

Fresh pineapple

Green grapes

Purple grapes

Red grapes

Mandarin oranges or tangerines (if you can't find these, then find a good-quality canned version that is canned in WATER and not syrup)

Kiwi

Star fruit (hard to find; try your local gourmet grocery but be prepared to spend money)

Oranges

Bananas

Small digression on the subject of bananas. I didn't know this, but bananas are a staple food of something like half the world's population. There are over 500 varieties and not all of them are sweet. The "banana" that we in the States are familiar with is the Kavendish; it replaced another single variety that went extinct in the mid- to late-twentieth century. The Kavendish is also expected to become extinct within our lifetimes; the current farms have trees that are sterile and aren't reproducing. Americans are, by and large, very unfamiliar with the wide variety of tastes and textures that bananas represent.

Berries of any kind; my favorites are boysenberries

Strawberries

Wash everything and put it in a big bowl. Pour a bit of orange juice and a squeeze of fresh lemon, and stir it all together. Drizzle some honey over top and stir again, then put in the fridge to meld. Serve cold with a sprig of lime and some whipped cream or sweetened Greek yogurt.

Pavlova to Die For by Nancy Lauzon

If you've never tasted Pavlova, you haven't lived. A word of caution—it's SWEET. For those born with a sweet tooth (like me) this is a good thing. But some people prefer their desserts a little tart or forgo dessert altogether, something I find difficult to do.

This particular recipe is my daughter's favorite, and I make it for her birthday every year. Nothing else will do. It's not that hard to make, but you can't whip it up at the last minute, so a little planning is in order.

Ingredients:

4 egg whites
1 cup sugar
1/2 tsp. vanilla
1 tsp. vinegar
2 cups whipping cream, whipped
1/2 cup slivered almonds
Fresh strawberries, raspberries and/or blueberries

Directions:

Whip egg whites until they form peaks. Gradually add sugar, vanilla & vinegar. Continue beating until very stiff. Spread on a parchment paper lined cookie sheet, forming a circle about 9" in diameter. Bake in a 275 degree oven for 1 hour. Turn oven off and leave in for 3 hours to dry. (As the meringue dries, it will spread out and form a larger circle). Once cooled and just before serving, top with freshly whipped cream, sliced berries and slivered almonds.

Succulent Raspberry-Banana Smoothies by Denise Agnew

If there's one thing I've learned about smoothies it's the ones you make at home have fewer calories, don't taste as sickeningly sweet as the store bought ones, and they're just nummy.

Ingredients:

1 sliced banana
1 container of raspberry yogurt
Handful of rinsed and drained raspberry fruit
Orange juice low sugar/low acid (frozen concentrate works well)
Ice

Directions:

Add orange juice concentrate and ice into blender. How much ice is really up to you. You can experiment. Blend orange juice and ice together, and then blend in yogurt. Next, add raspberries and banana and blend well. When you're done, you'll have a thoroughly healthy and delicious smoothie.

The Allure of Ice by A. Catherine Noon

Ingredients:

1 C non-fat Greek-style strained yogurt
1 C frozen fruit
1 T honey
1 t cake spice or cinnamon

Directions:

If you can find Greek-style yogurt, great. Watch out for some of the commercial brands, because they put a bunch of crap in it to make it seem like strained yogurt. The Fage brand, from Greece, is pure; the Trader Joe's store brand is good too.

If your store doesn't carry it, you can make it easily. Use a high quality plain yogurt, again without all the extra crap that the commercial yogurts have. My favorite brand is Seven Stars Farms because all that's in it is milk and cultures. Line a strainer with cheese cloth and put it over a large bowl, then put the yogurt into the cheese cloth. It will strain out all the liquid, which will drain into the bowl below; you can discard that. The yogurt left over is strained and can be used for this recipe and in all sorts of other recipes. Yum.

Finding good frozen fruit is worth the search. My favorite place is Trader Joe's. Whole Foods is good, but expensive. I've even found good fruit at Costco; you just have to watch for what they put in it (it should be FRUIT, not fruit and stuff). Best tasting is organic fruit, but that sometimes means a search.

Put the fruit in a bowl and spoon the yogurt over top. Drizzle with honey.

It's worth hunting around for different kinds of honey. Not all honey is the same, and not all of it is the light-yellow clear stuff we have in most American grocery stores. We have at my house over 40 different varieties from all over the world. They range in color from light, clear yellow to deep, dark brown and green. They all taste differently, too; one of my favorites is pine honey from Poland.

Sprinkle with some Cake Spice and you're good to go. I've said it before and will say it again: my favorite Cake Spice is from The Spice House, available online at:

<http://www.thespicehouse.com/spices/cake-spice>

Muffins and Breads

Cranberry Muffins with Butter Sauce by Renee Wildes

This is the epitome of Wisconsin farm breakfast decadence. REAL butter is a MUST. Served with fresh dark roast coffee with hazelnut creamer... Holy Hannah, it's a fab way to start the day. Some people like to put smashed walnuts in these, but I'm personally just not a big fan of nuts in muffins so I never have.

Muffins:

2 cups flour
2 cups whole cranberries
1 cup sugar
3 Tbsp. butter
½ cup water
½ cup evaporated milk
2 tsp. baking soda
1 tsp. salt

Directions:

Preheat oven to 350.

Grease muffin tins.

Sift flour, salt & baking soda together into large mixing bowl.

Combine remaining ingredients and add to dry ingredients. Mix until moist. Fill muffin tins.

Bake for 30 minutes.

Butter Sauce:

1 cup sugar

½ cup butter
½ cup evaporated milk
1 tsp. vanilla

Combine all ingredients in saucepan & bring to a boil. Cover & let simmer a few minutes. Serve warm over cut muffins.

Sinful Cinnamon Pinwheels by Nancy Lauzon

Excerpt from *Gone Groom Gone, a Chick Dick Mystery*:

“Callie did a double take as she passed the kitchen. Doreen stood at the counter, pounding her fist into a large ball of dough.

“What are you making?”

“Cinnamon pinwheels. The Miller baby shower.”

Doreen slammed the dough into the granite and kneaded it with so much force, she was panting.

“You look a little stressed,” Callie said. “You want to talk about it?”

“There’s nothing to talk about.”

“How’s Tom?”

Doreen grabbed a large cleaver and split the dough into two pieces with a thunk. “Tom who?”

Featured in my first novel, these cinnamon pinwheels are very easy to make, but they taste like you slaved for hours!

Ingredients:

3 cups flour
3 tsp. baking powder
pinch of salt

¼ cup sugar
1 cup shortening
1 cup milk
1/3 cup soft butter
½ cup brown sugar
2 tsp. cinnamon (or to taste)

Directions:

Cream shortening until softened.

Add sugar and blend well. In a separate bowl, mix dry ingredients (flour, baking powder, salt) together. Gradually add flour mixture to shortening mixture, alternately with milk, blending after each addition. Gather ball of dough onto a lightly floured surface. Using a rolling pin, roll into a rectangular-like shape approx. 1-inch thick.

Spread rectangle of dough with soft butter. Mix brown sugar and cinnamon together and sprinkle over butter. Starting at bottom end, roll into a cylinder shape. Slice crosswise into 1-inch thick pinwheels. Bake pinwheels on a cookie sheet at 350 for 20 – 25 minutes or until golden brown. Drizzle with icing if desired. Serve warm.

Pies

For My Sweetie Strawberry Pie by Kimberley Troutte

There's a town about 40 miles north of mine that is known throughout California for growing amazing strawberries. When strawberries are in season, I drive to a stand and load up with flats of berries unlike anything you'd find in the grocery store. Oh my gosh, my mouth is watering as I type this.

My hubby's birthday is at the start of the season and the perfect time to make a strawberry pie (or two). My sweetie pie loves his pies and he deserves only the best.

Ingredients:

1 package strawberry Jell-o
¾ cup sugar
3 tablespoons cornstarch
2 cups boiling water

4 cups of strawberries, washed, and stems removed
Pre-baked pie crust (I like graham cracker or chocolate)

In a large pot, combine dry ingredients and gradually pour in water. Bring to a boil and continue boiling, stirring for 5 minutes until clear and thick. Cool and add strawberries. Pour into baked pie shell and refrigerate.

Makes 1 pie.

Squares

Chocolate Pizza by Selena Robins

Most people love pizza.

Most people love chocolate.

Why not put those two together for a heavenly experience? The only thing missing is the stuffed crust, but then again, what's stopping you from using your imagination and stuffing the crust with more chocolate?

Chocolate Pizza is also a favorite of Maddie Saunders, the heroine in *What A Girl Wants*. I swear that girl would dip broccoli and asparagus in chocolate if she could.

Kids will love this pizza and the kid in the adult will also enjoy a slice...or two.

Ingredients:

Pizza dough (store-bought or homemade)
1/2 stick unsalted butter (about 2 tablespoons butter) melted
1/4 cup as Nutella spared
3/4 cup milk chocolate chips

For Optional Toppings see below

Directions:

Preheat oven to 450°F.

Line a baking sheet with parchment paper.

Sprinkle some flour on your working surface.

Roll out dough on the surface (if using a round pizza pan, then roll out to fit pan, or if using a square pan roll out to fit that pan)

Transfer dough to baking sheet.

Using your thumb, make indentations all over the dough.

Brush the dough with melted butter over.

Bake for about 20 minutes (until dough is a light golden.)

Remove from oven and spread the Nutella over the hot crust.

Sprinkle the chocolate chips all over and return to the oven.

Bake for another 2 - 3 minutes or until chocolate begins to melt.

Cut into slices.

Delicious this way, or experiment with the optional toppings below, or some of your own creations.

Optional Toppings.

Mini marshmallows (sprinkle on top and broil for 1 - 2 minutes, until marshmallows are golden)

Sprinkle with chopped hazelnuts before serving

Sprinkle with shredded coconut before serving

Add colorful M&M's before serving

Sprinkle a bit of cayenne pepper, for that sweet & spicy experience

Marry Me Squares by Nancy Lauzon

This recipe came from my daughter's in-laws. It's a top secret family recipe, and they said the only way I could get my hands on it was if my daughter married their son. She would have married him anyway, but snagging this recipe was a definite bonus. Now you can have it, and you don't even have to marry into my family. Aren't you the lucky one?

Ingredients:

1 ½ cups Graham cracker crumbs
½ cup melted butter
1 can Eagle Brand milk
1 cup toffee bites or Skor or Heath bar, crumbled
½ cup chopped pecans
½ cup slivered almonds
1 cup chocolate chips

Directions:

Line a 13 x 9 baking pan with parchment paper. Tip: butter the pan first before putting the parchment paper down.

In medium bowl, combine crumbs and butter. Press into pan. Pour Eagle Brand milk evenly over crumbs. Top with toffee, pecans, almonds and chocolate chips, in that order. Press down firmly.

Bake in 350 oven for 20 – 25 minutes. Let cool overnight before cutting.

Men are from Mars Bars Squares by Nancy Lauzon

*Note: Mars Bars have long been available in Canada and have been peanut-free since 2006. The American version of Mars Bars was discontinued in 2002, re-launched in 2010 and contains almonds.

It's high time I included a recipe containing CHOCOLATE, since I'm a chocolate junkie from way back. And those who know me are well aware that I prefer FAST & EASY recipes that a monkey could whip up. Put these 3 words together: CHOCOLATE, FAST & EASY and what do you get? My favorite squares!

Ingredients:

4 Mars Bars
¼ cup margarine or butter
2 ½ cups Rice Krispies
4 Jersey or Hershey plain chocolate bars

Directions:

Break up 4 Mars Bars into pieces and place in a microwavable bowl.

Add margarine and melt together in the microwave for 1 or 2 minutes, stirring after one minute. Stir until smooth. Add Rice Krispies and mix well. Press into buttered 8 x 8 square pan with rubber spatula.

Break up Jersey Milk or Hersey Milk chocolate bars and melt in the microwave for 1 or 2 minutes (use medium heat as chocolate can burn easily) and stir until smooth. Spread over top of Mars Bar/Rice Krispie mixture. Cool and cut into squares.

Refrigerate.

Saucepan Brownies by Renee Wildes

Sometimes you just need “stress food.” I’m a big fan of the chocolate alternative to homicide. Amazing how much better your mood is after one of these bad boys. I think they should have been served on a battlefield before the fight—wonder what the globe would look like? (And yes, I DO see there are nuts in the recipe. Brownies are NOT muffins.) I know, I sound like a hypocrite, and some of you are thinking, “that’s just weird.”

Ingredients:

1 cup sugar
¾ cup flour
½ cup chopped nuts
1/3 cup butter
2 eggs
2 squares unsweetened chocolate
½ tsp. vanilla
¼ tsp. salt

Directions:

Preheat oven to 375.

Grease & flour an 8 x 8 pan.

Melt the butter & chocolate in a saucepan over low heat. Remove from heat & add remaining ingredients. Pour into baking pan.

Bake for 35-40 minutes. Test center with toothpick for doneness.

Allow to cool. Spread with frosting. (See below)

Frosting:

1 cup sugar

2 Tbsp. cocoa

2 tsp. white corn syrup

¼ cup butter

¼ cup milk

1 tsp. vanilla

In a saucepan combine sugar, cocoa, butter, corn syrup & milk. Cook over low heat until it comes to hard boil; allow to boil for 1 minute. Remove from heat & allow to cool until thickens. Add vanilla & beat until spreadable. Spread over cooled brownies.

EPILOGUE (Holiday Recipes)

Holiday Breakfast Dishes

Baked French Toast with Praline Sauce by Renee Wildes

My stepmother make this one Sunday morning for breakfast. Amazing stuff—makes the whole house smell homey. That, fresh-brewed coffee and thick-sliced peppercorn bacon is guaranteed to get the SOUNDEST sleeper out of bed!

Ingredients:

1 loaf of white bread or egg bread, cut into cubes
8 eggs
1 8-oz. pkg. cream cheese, cubed into 16 squares
1-1/2 cups half-and-half
½ cup maple syrup
6 Tbsp. melted butter
1 tsp. vanilla
1 tsp. cinnamon

Directions:

Layer half the bread in bottom of 9 x 13 baking dish. Top with cream cheese. Cover with remaining bread. In a large mixing bowl, combine all other ingredients and pour over bread. Press so bread soaks up mixture. Cover & refrigerate overnight.

Preheat oven to 350. Cover pan with foil & bake for 40-50 minutes. Serve warm with Praline Sauce: (See below)

Praline Sauce

1 cup dark corn syrup
3 Tbsp. packed brown sugar
3 Tbsp. water
½ cup coarsely chopped pecans
¼ tsp. vanilla

In a saucepan, combine corn syrup, sugar & water. Cook over medium-low heat, stirring constantly, until mixture boils. Boil for 1 minute & remove from heat. Add nuts & vanilla. Drizzle over the French toast. Cut into squares & serve warm.

Holiday Desserts

Cape Breton Pork Pies by Nancy Lauzon

The name of this recipe is misleading. Pork Pies are a DESSERT on the island of Cape Breton, and contain NO PORK! They're also tarts, not pies. There are a million theories as to where the name came from, and probably none of them are true. We enjoyed these every year at Christmas,

along with my grandmother's shortbread cookies. A crisp cookie tart shell, a sweet date filling, and maple icing make these tarts a unique and delicious treat. My apologies ahead of time for the vague directions. This is my grandmother's recipe, and being an expert baker, she didn't always elaborate with enough detail for novices like me.

Ingredients:

1–1 ½ cups flour
½ cup butter
2 Tbsp. icing sugar
¼ tsp. salt

Directions:

Mix and knead into a cookie dough. Roll out to approximately ¼" thickness. Using a cookie cutter, cut out circles of dough large enough to line shallow muffin tins or tart tins. A note about the tins—this recipe doesn't work as well with regular muffin tins, they're too deep.

Bake in 400 oven for approximately 15 minutes, or until lightly browned. Cool.

Filling

2 lbs. dates
2 tsp. lemon juice
Approximately 2 Tbsp. water (enough to soften the dates)
A pinch of salt

Cook dates in saucepan to make a soft filling. Cool. Fill each muffin tin with date mixture.

Maple Frosting

½ cup butter
1 cup brown sugar
¼ cup milk
3 cups icing sugar
½ tsp. vanilla

Directions:

Melt butter in saucepan. Add brown sugar over low heat, stirring. Add milk. Bring to boil. Remove from heat. Gradually add icing sugar. Add vanilla. Mix well. Thin with milk if too thick. Cool. Spread on Pork Pies.

Celebrate any Holiday with English Trifle by Selena Robins

My mum-in-law used to make the best trifle ever. Actually, hers was the first and only trifle I have ever tasted, but I'm pretty sure if I tasted others hers would still rank as five stars in my opinion.

Here is the recipe she used to use, although, I have had to tweak it because none of us like Sherry, so this is a non-boozy trifle.

You can use store bought box mix for the custard, instead of making the custard from scratch, but I've never had it that way, so I can't give you my stamp of personal approval on the boxed custard.

Ingredients:

5 oz milk
8 1/2 oz heavy cream
4 TBSP sugar
6 large egg yolks
1 vanilla pod, split and seeds removed (or 2 tsp. of artificial vanilla)
8 oz sponge or pound cake, cut into thick slices
1 can of peaches, sliced
1 pint of fresh strawberries (or raspberries)
2 cups whipping cream, softly whipped

Directions:

In a large, round glass bowl, layer the bottom with slices of pound cake (or sponge cake). Pour the juice of the canned peaches over the cake. Add the sliced peaches on top of cake. Set aside and make your custard.

Custard:

Turn stove top to medium-low.

In a saucepan add milk and cream and one teaspoon of sugar.

Bring to a gentle simmer. Once it is simmering, turn the heat to its lowest.

In a large heat proof bowl, add the rest of the sugar and the egg yolks. Whisk egg yolks and sugar until light and creamy. The color should be a pale yellow.

Keep whisking and slowly pour the warmed milk into the egg mixture.

Strain the custard sauce through a fine sieve and then pour it back into the saucepan then add the seeds from the vanilla pod.

Over a low heat, stir constantly.

The custard will gradually thicken.

Keep whisking, and make sure the heat is on low, as you don't want to burn your custard or have it look like curdles.

Once the custard is thickened, removed from the heat and pour through a sieve again.

Once it is cooled, wrap the bowl with saran wrap and put it in the fridge, while you assemble the rest of the elements for your trifle.

Add the fresh strawberries (or raspberries) evenly on top of the peach slices.

Spoon the custard over evenly in a thick layer.

Top with a thick layer of whipped cream.

Chocolate Mint Squares by Renee Wildes

These make very popular gifts—great for cookie exchanges.

Ingredients:

1 cup flour

1 cup sugar
4 eggs
1 16-oz. can chocolate syrup
½ cup butter, softened
1 tsp. vanilla
½ tsp. salt

Directions:

Preheat oven to 350. Grease & flour a 9 x 13 x 2 pan. In a large mixing bowl, cream together butter & sugar, beating until light & fluffy. Add eggs one at a time, beating thoroughly between each. In a separate mixing bowl, combine flour & salt. Gradually/alternately add flour and chocolate syrup to butter mixture—START & FINISH with FLOUR. Pour batter into baking pan & bake for approximately 25 minutes. Test center with toothpick. Cool completely.

Frosting:

¼ cup softened butter
2 cups sifted powdered confectioner's sugar
2 Tbsp. Crème de Menthe

Cream butter; gradually add sugar & crème de menthe and mix well. Spread evenly over cake.

Chill about 1 hour.

Glaze:

1 6-oz. pkg. semi-sweet chocolate bits
½ cup butter

In a double boiler, combine chocolate & butter in top and bring water to a boil. Reduce heat to low and stir constantly until chocolate thoroughly melts. Drizzle over frosted cake; chill for at least another hour before cutting.

I Hate Fruitcake Gumdrops by Nancy Lauzon

There are two camps when it comes to fruitcake. You either love it or hate it. There seems to be no middle ground. My grandmother made really nice fruitcake – light and almondy flavored, not the disgusting dark kind—but my kids and husband hated fruitcake. My concession to them was to make a delicious Gumdrops Cake every year—a pound cake with candies. What's not to love? Gradually I began to notice that I had lots left over in the freezer, enough to serve at my birthday the end of February. My family finally spilled. They didn't like the Gumdrops Cake any better than the fruitcake. I say, tough. I really love this cake. I hope you do, too. Note: this makes a lot of cake. Slice it up and you could feed a small village.

Ingredients:

2 cups white sugar
1 cup butter
4 eggs
1 cup milk
1 tsp. almond extract
1 tsp. lemon extract
1 tsp. baking powder
3 cups flour (1 cup will be used to flour gumdrops)
4 small bags of baking gums – approximately 4 cups (baking gums are very small and contain no black gum drops, which will discolor the cake. Available in the baking department of most grocery stores, or bulk food stores).

Directions:

Grease and flour a tube pan (or angel food cake pan). Preheat oven to 350.

Mix 2 cups flour with 1 tsp. baking powder and set aside. In a separate bowl, cream butter, add sugar. Add eggs one at a time. Beat well. In another small bowl, add lemon and almond extracts to milk. Add milk mixture and flour mixture alternately to creamed mixture, stirring only until just mixed. Stir in floured gumdrops. Bake approximately 1-1½ hours. Cake should be golden brown with some cracks along the top. Cake is done when toothpick inserted in center comes out clean.

It's the Great Pumpkin Pie by Kimberley Troutte

For Thanksgiving 2012, my seventeen-year-old son wanted to make a pumpkin pie to take to Grandma's house. It was a bitter sweet get-together this year as Grandpa had passed in January and the pain was still fresh for all of us. Grandma and Grandpa were married for over fifty years. I can't imagine losing the love of my life. I can barely wrap my head around losing the man who

was like a second father to me and who discussed character arcs and plotlines with me for hours. Sigh.

My son wanted to make something sweet and comforting. Just like my boy is. The pie was amazing, light and smooth. I'd really call it a pumpkin cheesecake. Actually, I'd call it perfect. From my family to yours please enjoy this special, sweet, gift. And be sure to hug your loved ones for me.

Ingredients:

1 (8-ounce) package cream cheese, softened
2 cups canned pumpkin
1 cup sugar
1/4 tsp. salt
1 egg plus 2 egg yolks, slightly beaten
1 cup half-and-half
1/4 cup melted butter
1 tsp vanilla extract
1 tsp ground cinnamon
1 tsp ground ginger
1 pre-made pie dough in 9-inch pan
vanilla bean ice cream

Directions:

Preheat the oven to 350 degrees.

In a food processor, beat the cream cheese. Add the pumpkin, sugar and salt, and beat until combined. In a bowl melt the butter in the microwave, then add the eggs, the yolks and half-and-half. Mix with spoon. Pour melted butter mixture into the pumpkin-cheese mixture still in the food processor and mix together until smooth. Finally, add the vanilla, cinnamon, and ginger, and beat until incorporated.

Pour the filling into the pie crust and bake for 50 minutes, or until the center is set. Place the pie on a wire rack and cool to room temperature. Cut into slices and include a generous amount of vanilla ice cream on each plate.

My Grandmother's Shortbreads by Nancy Lauzon

I grew up enjoying these cookies every Christmas. This very old recipe hails from Cape Breton, Nova Scotia, where my mother and grandmother were born. My grandmother would make them ahead of time and freeze them in large Tupperware containers. I would sneak down to the basement and eat them frozen straight from the freezer—delicious! But they ARE supposed to be eaten at room temperature. Double the recipe for a larger crowd.

Ingredients:

1 cup butter (do NOT use margarine)
1/3 cup brown sugar
2 ½ cups flour
2 Tbsp. cornstarch

Directions:

Cream butter until very soft. Gradually add sugar. Add sifted flour and cornstarch gradually. Turn onto floured surface and roll to ½” thickness – not too thin. Dough will be crumbly at first, but the more you work with it the easier it’ll get. Shape using a round cookie cutter. Bake in 325 oven for approximately 25 minutes. Do not over bake. Bottoms will be light brown, tops will be lighter.

Frost with butter icing and top with sliced red and green cherries.

Butter Icing

1/3 cup butter
4 cups icing sugar
¼ tsp. salt
2 to 3 Tbsp. milk
1 tsp. almond extract

Directions:

Cream butter. Add remaining ingredients and beat until smooth. Thin with more milk, or thicken by adding more icing sugar. Note: this recipe makes enough icing to frost a 13 x 9” cake or a double layer cake. Used for shortbreads, you will have a lot left over.

Popcorn Snowmen in Southern California by Kimberley Troutte

We rarely get snow at my house. In fact, the last time it snowed was during a freak cold storm in March 1999. I bundled my little son and raced him outside to experience a weird blimp in nature. He spun around in a circle, tipped his face toward the sky, and said, "Feels like I'm flying."

Since my kids don't get to make real Frosties in the yard, creating popcorn snowmen in the kitchen is the next best thing.

Ingredients:

15 cups popped popcorn

1/2 cup butter or margarine

2 10-ounce packages marshmallows

Thin pretzel sticks and candy

Homemade Royal Icing for glue (see below)

Royal Icing

2 egg whites

3 cups of confectioners' sugar

1/4 teaspoon cream of tartar

Beat ingredients until creamy and smooth. Spoon into a zip-lock bag with a hole cut in one corner. Set aside.

Popcorn Snowmen

Melt the butter/margarine in a nonstick pan on low heat. Add marshmallows and stir until melted. Pour popped popcorn into a large bowl and coat with the melted ingredients. Wait until it is cool enough to handle. Rub margarine on your hands and form three popcorn balls. Use the Royal Icing to glue on candy eyes, pretzel stick arms, maybe a candy corn nose, red hots for buttons...

Makes about 5 snowmen.

Santa's Elves Love Apple Pie by Kimberley Troutte

This is my son's recipe. At twelve years old he decided to make an apple pie complete with lattice crust. This is the same kid who wanted to make fudge for his entire class and wouldn't let me help. He also taught himself how to make potstickers. Apparently, the chef-gene passed straight from my mother into my son.

All Butter Crust for Apple Pie

Ingredients:

2 1/2 cups all-purpose flour (might need extra for rolling)
1 cup unsalted butter, cold and cut into 1/2 inch cubes
1 tsp each, sugar and salt
6-8 tablespoons ice water

Directions:

In a food processor pulse to mix, salt and sugar. Add butter and pulse 6 to 8 times until mixture resembles coarse meal with pea-sized pieces of butter. Add ice water 1 tablespoon at a time. Pulse the food processor so that the dough begins to clump together. Remove from the machine and place in a mound on a clean surface. Gently shape into 2 discs. Little bits of butter should still be seen in the dough to keep the crust flaky. Sprinkle a little bit of flour over the 2 discs and wrap them in plastic wrap. Refrigerate for at least an hour, no longer than 2 days.

Apple Pie

Ingredients:

1/2 cup unsalted butter
3 tablespoons all-purpose flour
1/2 cup sugar
1/2 cup packed brown sugar
1/4 cup water
8 Granny Smith apples—peeled, cored and sliced

Directions:

In a sauce pan, melt butter. Stir in flour, sugar, brown sugar and water and bring to a boil. Reduce temperature to simmer for 5 minutes, set sugar-butter liquid aside. Fill bottom crust with

apples. Mound lightly. Cover with top crust lattice work. Slowly pour the sugar-butter liquid over the lattice. Bake for 15 minutes at 425 degrees. Reduce temperature to 350 and bake for another 35-45 minutes.

When ready to make pie, let one of the discs sit for 5-10 minutes to soften. Roll out on a lightly floured, clean surface with a rolling pin to form a 12-inch circle, appx. 1/8 of an inch thick. Place into a 9-inch pie plate to form the bottom crust. Trim the edges with kitchen scissors to within 1/2 inch of the edge of the pie plate. To make the lattice for the top crust, roll out the second disc of dough. Score with a knife to make strips.

Holiday Main Dishes

Any Day is a Holiday with Comforting Chili by Selena Robins

Besides chocolate and ice-cream, chili has comfort written all over it.

I had a “Chili Throw Down” on my blog, where I invited two guests to share their chili recipes. One of my guests was Gitte Doherty from Totally Booked Blog.

There was no clear cut winner in the throw down because the recipes, although different were all delicious.

Gitte’s and my crock pots did start a budding romance. Gitte names her crock pot, Mike, I’ve named mine Lucy. Together they steamed up our kitchens. I know what you’re thinking; “They name their slow cookers?” Some people assign names to their cars, so for foodie type romance authors and bloggers we name our kitchen appliances.

Cooking is all about having fun—in our case, a bit of over-the-top crazy fun.

The following is my chili recipe, however, I took one of the elements (chocolate) from Gitte’s chili recipe (chocolate) and added it to mine, and the result was amazing.

Mike and Lucy do make beautiful chili together. One never knows, I may write a crock pot romance one day.

Ingredients:

2 lbs premium cut stew meat, cubed in small pieces

1 lb. pork sausage, sliced

1 onion, chopped
2 garlic cloves, minced
2 jalapeno (de-seeded, chopped) (leave seeds in if you like it spicy)
1 sweet yellow pepper, chopped
1 sweet orange pepper, chopped
2 zucchini, chopped in small pieces
2 cups cherry (or grape) tomatoes
1 can red kidney beans, drained
1 can white kidney beans, drained
1 can black beans, drained
1 can tomato soup
1 can of plum tomatoes (drain the liquid and chop up the tomatoes)
6 oz dry red wine (don't use cooking wine, use wine that you would drink)
6 TBSP chili powder
1 TBSP (or less or don't add if you don't like it spicy) red cayenne pepper
1 oz of excellent quality dark chocolate preferable with a minimum 70% cocoa, chopped finely
3 tsp. sea salt
Oil

Directions:

In a heavy saucepan, heat oil and sauté onion and garlic until soft but not brown.

Add beef and sausage and cook until meat is brown, then drain off fat.

Reduce heat to medium low and add red wine and cook for 3 minutes.

Add meat and the rest of the ingredients to your crock pot, stir and cook on low for 8 to 10 hours.

Serve with a dollop of spicy sour cream.

Spicy Sour Cream

1 cup sour cream
1 juice of a fresh lemon
As much or as little hot sauce (or red pepper)

Stir all together

Best Roast Ever by Denise Agnew

Ingredients:

1-5 pound rib-eye roast
1 teaspoon salt
1 tablespoon Dijon mustard
1 tablespoon honey
1 ½ teaspoons black pepper
1 teaspoon garlic powder

Directions:

Preheat oven to 450 degrees. Sprinkle roast with salt. Combine mustard and honey in small bowl. Rub over roast to coat. Combine pepper and garlic powder in another small bowl and sprinkle over roast. Place roast in a roasting pan coated with cooking spray. Bake at 450 degrees for 20 minutes. Reduce oven temperature to 300 degrees (don't remove roast from oven) and bake 1 ½ hours or until thermometer inserted into center of roast registers 135 degrees. Remove from oven and tent loosely with foil. Let stand at least 15 minutes before cutting into slices.

Crock Pot Chicken Gumbo for Mardi Gras by Selena Robins

Celebrate Mardi Gras by putting on some jazz music, get some colorful beads from the Dollar Store and transport your family and friends to New Orleans with this hearty, delicious, easy to make gumbo.

Ingredients:

4 boneless, skinless chicken breasts
2 cups sweet (or spicy) sausages, sliced about one inch thick
1 can diced tomatoes
3 cups chicken broth
5 cups water
1 cup raw or frozen okra, sliced
1 cup chopped onion

1/2 cup sweet red pepper
1 1/2 cups of white (or brown) rice, uncooked
2 tsp. fresh parsley, chopped
1/2 tsp. red pepper flakes
1 garlic clove, minced
1 tsp. celery salt
salt and black pepper to taste

Directions:

Brown the chicken breasts on both sides remove from heat and cut into bite sized pieces. Set aside.

Brown the sausage, set aside.

In a crock pot add: everything EXCEPT the okra and rice. Okra and rice will be added later.

Cook on low for six hours.

At the end of five hours, add the rice and okra and let cook for one hour on low.

Stir and serve immediately.

Holiday Ham by Renee Wildes

The last time we went to visit my dad in Maine, he made this for Sunday dinner. He was lucky enough to have a big enough bucket to not have to flip his ham—it's a struggle and I tend to splash and make a mess. (I'm a klutz.) You get the spicy ham, the sweet fruit and the sour-ish wine—it's a great combination. And it makes a great glaze. Sitting around with a SECOND bottle of red wine. (I like Cabernet or Zinfandel for cooking and Merlot or Shiraz for drinking. I'm especially partial to Australian reds, like Black Opal and Rosemont.) Dad recommends NOT cooking with a “good” wine, since you're gonna “kill” it with the pineapple juice and brown sugar...

Ingredients:

1 canned cooked ham, scored
1 jar whole cloves

1-2 bags brown sugar
1 bottle dark red wine
1 large can pineapple juice

Directions:

Stud ham with cloves, place in deep baking pan. Pack brown sugar around ham. Combine wine & pineapple juice & pour over sugar-packed ham to cover as much as possible. Refrigerate covered overnight. About halfway, turn over to marinate the other side.

Preheat oven to 350. Cover ham with foil and bake in marinade for 2 hours. Uncover and bake an additional 30 minutes, basting frequently. Remove from oven. Remove ham from liquid. Allow to stand a few minutes before slicing. Remove cloves & slice. Discard liquid.

How to Brine a Turkey by A. Catherine Noon

If you have the time to start it the day before, brining your turkey can be a toothsome way to prepare it for a festival dinner. It's not hard, just takes time to let the turkey steep in the brine.

Ingredients:

14 pound, 6 kg turkey
1 cup kosher salt
1/2 cup light brown sugar
1 gallon vegetable stock
1 tablespoon black peppercorns
1 1/2 teaspoons allspice berries
1 1/2 teaspoons chopped candied ginger
1 gallon heavily iced water

Directions:

Put the salt, sugar, stock, peppercorns, allspice berries, and ginger into a large pot over medium-high heat. Bring to a boil.

Stir to dissolve the solids.

Remove from heat, return to room temperature and refrigerate.

In a 5 gallon, 19 liter bucket, combine the brine, water and ice.

Place the turkey breast-side down in the brine. Weigh down the turkey to make sure it's fully immersed.

Cover and refrigerate for 8 to 16 hours, turning the turkey once halfway through.

Roast turkey as you normally would. The brining makes the meat moist and succulent.

New Year's Eve Apricot Glazed Ham by A. Catherine Noon

Ingredients:

1 5- to 7- pound, 2.3- to 3 kg fully cooked boneless smoked ham
whole cloves
1/2 cup apricot preserves
1 1/2 t cornstarch
1 t finely shredded orange peel
3 T orange juice
1/8 t ground cinnamon or cake spice

Directions:

Score the ham, using a sharp knife, make shallow cuts diagonally across the ham in a diamond pattern.

Stud with cloves.

Place ham on a rack in a shallow roasting pan.

Insert meat thermometer.

Bake, uncovered, in 325F, 163C oven for 1 3/4 to 2 1/4 hours or until thermometer registers 140 F, 60C.

In a saucepan, blend preserves with cornstarch.

Stir in orange peel, juice and cinnamon or cake spice.

As I've said elsewhere, choose your cake spice well. My favorite comes from The Spice House. Their cinnamon is phenomenal as well; it's worth checking them both out to see which you prefer for this recipe.

<http://www.thespicehouse.com/spices/cake-spice>

Cook and stir until thickened and bubbly.

Spoon some over ham 2 or 3 times during the last 30 minutes of baking.

Serves 12 to 16.

Seven Fishes Dinner by A. Catherine Noon

In the early 1990's, I was privileged to be part of Long Beach Womenspirit's Crone Circle. One of their brilliant ideas was to put together a Crone Book, where participants brought enough copies for each person and we all shared copies, keeping them in our own Crone Book for safety. We shared anything we didn't want to lose: recipes, family stories, pictures, poetry, and all sorts of stuff. The idea is that none of us wanted another crone to leave this plane without sharing her stories for the benefit of the generations to come after.

I love that idea. It's in that spirit that I share this lovely Italian-American tradition, because many Italian-Americans I know and even some Italians have never heard of it and, to my knowledge, it's not something practiced outside that community.

Christmas Eve is a huge family feast called the Seven Fishes Dinner. It is a seven course meal featuring, literally, seven different fish dishes. To me, it seems to be a celebration of abundance because putting on a meal of this size isn't cheap.

First Course: Salad, bread, and shrimp cocktail. We served jumbo shrimp for the cocktail but any shrimp would do.

Second and Third Course: Linguine with Clams. We also served the tentacles from the squid in the linguine. Sometimes tuna or lobster will be the third course.

Fourth and Fifth Course: Stuffed Calamad (Calamari) and Grilled Salmon.

Sixth and Seventh Course: Breaded Trout and Crab Cakes.

It's an enormous amount of food and a celebration of cooking skills in each family. It's also a way to pass on those skills to the next generation. It's an honor to get to cook with Mom-Mom and help prepare the meal, and the Stuffed Calamad is a big deal. It's also the subject of a lot of joking, since the little buggers aren't exactly easy to stuff.

If you poke around on the internet, you can find more information on the Feast of the Seven Fishes, which might whet your appetite. But my purpose, here, is to point out that our traditions ground us and this tradition is practiced by my husband's family and other Italian Catholics that I know. It's a lovely practice and if you have the honor of attending, don't fill up on the bread and salad.

Holiday Side Dishes

Broccoli Cheese Casserole by Nancy Lauzon

This is our favorite vegetable on the Christmas dinner menu. Even family members who don't like vegetables love this, and we never have any left overs.

Ingredients:

1 or 2 bunches of broccoli, chopped
1 bunch of cauliflower, chopped
1 can cheddar cheese soup - undiluted
1 can cream of broccoli soup – undiluted (you can also use cream of mushroom)
 $\frac{3}{4}$ cup of mayonnaise
 $\frac{1}{2}$ cup shredded cheddar cheese
1 cup dry bread crumbs
 $\frac{1}{2}$ cup Parmesan cheese plus $\frac{1}{4}$ cup, divided
 $\frac{1}{4}$ cup melted butter
1 cup shredded cheddar cheese

Directions:

Grease a 9 x 13 casserole dish and preheat oven to 350. Put equal amounts of broccoli and cauliflower in the casserole dish until it's about 2/3 full. In a bowl, mix together soups, mayonnaise and ½ cup cheddar cheese. Pour over the vegetables and mix well. Using a fork, combine bread crumbs and ½ cup Parmesan cheese. Add melted butter. Sprinkle over casserole to make a thin layer.

Sprinkle additional cup of shredded cheddar and remaining ¼ cup of Parmesan on top. Bake covered (with tented aluminum foil) at 350 for 35 minutes. Remove foil and continue baking for 10 -15 minutes until top is browned and sauce is bubbly. Serve hot.

Cheesy Potatoes by Renee Wildes

This is one of those “family gathering” staples from Grandma Wilde’s book. My mother-in-law always has to make 2 or 3 pans whenever we get together for Thanksgiving or Christmas. We try to blame it on having a family full of teenage boys, but honestly, we ALL love it.

Ingredients:

1 lb. frozen shredded hash browns, thawed
1 cup sour cream
½ can cream of chicken soup
½ cup melted butter
4 oz. shredded sharp cheddar cheese
½ tsp. onion salt
salt & pepper to taste

Directions:

Preheat oven to 375. Lightly grease a 9 x 13 baking pan. Place hash browns in pan. In a mixing bowl, combine sour cream, soup, melted butter & onion salt together, mixing well. Pour over potatoes & top with cheese; stir lightly. Cover & bake for 45 minutes. Uncover & bake an additional 15 minutes more until golden brown.

Christmas Salad by Nancy Lauzon

When you're sick of heavy turkey dinners and want an alternative to mashed potatoes, sometimes a salad is called for. This one looks very festive in a clear glass or plastic bowl, thanks to the green spinach and red strawberries.

Ingredients:

1 bag of baby spinach leaves
1 cup sliced strawberries
¼ cup sugar
1 Tbsp. finely chopped onion
¼ tsp. Worcestershire Sauce
¼ tsp. paprika
½ cup olive oil
¼ cup apple cider vinegar
2 Tbsp. sesame seeds

Directions:

Wash spinach and dry completely. Add strawberries. Mix remaining ingredients separately. Toss salad with dressing just before serving. (Note: I find this makes a lot of dressing, and I don't use it all unless I double the spinach and strawberries for a larger crowd, so add only as much dressing as you need to coat the salad).

Green Bean Casserole by Denise Agnew

What's a holiday without green bean casserole? You can find a lot of variations on this recipe, but I like this one best.

Ingredients:

1 can cream of mushroom soup (I don't use fat free in this recipe)
½ cup milk
1 teaspoon soy sauce
Dash of pepper
Two cans of cut green beans
1 can French fried onions

Directions:

In 1 ½ quart casserole dish mix soup, milk, soy, pepper, beans, and half a can of onions. Bake at 350 degrees for twenty-five minutes. Stir. Sprinkle remaining onions over bean mixture. Bake another 5 minutes or until onions are golden.

How to Mash Potatoes Like an Irishman by A. Catherine Noon

I gained ten pounds when I found out how easy it is to mash potatoes. I've since learned less fattening ways to make them, but be careful. Potatoes are addictive, as any Irishman can tell you.

The first thing to consider is the potato. I've tried mashed potatoes with all sorts of different ones, from russet to red new potatoes, Yukon gold, purple, and a mixture of colors. My favorites are red potatoes followed by russets. Experiment until you find the ones you like best.

Wash and really scrub your potatoes. I don't skin them and here's why: they taste better, for one thing, and for another, that's where a lot of the vitamins are. Don't take the skins off and discard them, or you're losing a lot of the nutritive value of the tuber! Cut off any eyes that have formed and then cut them into one inch chunks (about two and a half centimeters). You want the chunks to roughly be the same size but don't go crazy – it's for ease of cooking, not appearance. You're mashing them, remember.

What you cook them in is important. You can, of course, use the traditional water. If that's your pleasure, then cover them and bring to a boil and cook at a rolling boil until tender. But pause here and think a while.

If you use a broth of some kind, you can add flavor and nutrition without adding calories. Chicken broth is good, or vegetable broth if you don't eat meat. You can put some spices in at this stage but they won't add a whole ton of flavor because you're going to discard most of the fluid before you mash them.

If you cook them in broth, it works the same way: boil until tender. You can tell they're tender when a fork inserted into one slides in easily. If you use broth, then reserve some of the liquid for mashing. If you use water, then dump the cooked potatoes into a strainer and let the water go. Return the potatoes to the pot for mashing.

You can use a fork but it takes a long time. I prefer to use a masher, and they're easy to find at a cookware shop. Yes, you can use a food processor, but it's fun to mash the heck out of them by hand and it's good exercise, too. If you cooked the potatoes in water, then add a little milk or cream to them when you mash along with some butter. If you used broth, then add some of the broth and butter. I like putting in some 0% fat Greek-style strained yogurt here because it provides thickness and flavor without all the fat of the butter.

See, here's the thing: you can dress these up the caloric scale or down, depending on how many calories you want to spend. Potatoes in and of themselves are good for you, so use some thought here. You can get a lot of good vitamins and vegetable goodness out of them if you don't overload them with butter and cream and all sorts of high-fat stuff that tastes good but just packs pounds on your ass.

You can also chop all sorts of stuff up and add them to the potatoes. Ideas:

cubed ham, cheddar cheese, chives or green onions, broccoli flowers, cabbage, bacon

Once you make them, you'll wonder how those folks that make those flaked potatoes in a box make any money at all. Obviously, it's for people who don't realize how easy it is to have the real thing.

Pea and Bacon Salad by A. Catherine Noon

If you haven't already figured it out, I'm very interested in preserving our personal histories. My mother used to make a pea and bacon salad, but as she neared the end of her life she became more and more mentally unstable. One of her instabilities involved food and she stopped preparing holiday meals because they made us fat. When she died, two of my favorite recipes of hers died with her.

Don't let this happen in your family. If you have favorite foods, or even special preparations of standard dishes, record them. Write them down or even video them. You don't want to look back when those folks are gone and regret not having what they made.

As close as I can remember, here's the salad:

Ingredients:

1/4 C mayonnaise
6 slices crisp bacon
Salt
Sliced green onion
1 C peas

Directions:

Combine ingredients in a mixing bowl and stir thoroughly. Serve chilled as-is or over a bed of fresh lettuce leaves.

Thanksgiving Green Bean & Corn Casserole by Kimberley Troutte

Thanksgiving is a special holiday in the United States. It is a historical reminder of how important it is to be kind to and generous with one another, no matter our differences. The pilgrims would not have survived without their neighbors. This day is all about being grateful, sharing, getting together with loved ones and of course eating a fantastic, delicious meal.

My parents invited friends and sometimes strangers to our Thanksgiving table because no one should have to be alone on this day. Mom would serve traditional favorites including a casserole that she and her sister made.

I share it with you and wish your family a day full of blessings and thankfulness, no matter where you live.

Ingredients:

1 can each, French style green beans, white corn, cream of celery or mushroom soup
1 small onion, chopped
1 8 oz. sour cream (can use Greek style non-sweet yogurt)
1 cup, each grated cheddar cheese, sliced almonds
1 stick of butter (or margarine)
1 roll of Ritz crackers, finely crushed

Directions:

Grease 13x9 casserole dish. Layer beans and corn into dish. Combine onion, sour cream (or yogurt), soup, cheese and pour over bean/corn layers, but do not mix in. Melt butter and add crushed crackers and almonds. Spread cracker mixture over casserole as a topping. Bake uncovered at 350 degrees for 30 minutes.

Serves 8-10

The Best Troutte Family Christmas Rice by Kimberley Troutte

On Christmas morning, the kids jump out of bed way too early and the adults stumble to the lighted tree with a cup of Joe in hand. The youngest child in the group is named Santa's Helper and given the exciting task of routing under the tree for everyone's gifts.

By midday, we take a break from playing with our new toys and go to the movies. Some of the best movies of the year are released in time for the holidays.

After the blockbuster, we return home for a big family meal that rivals Thanksgiving. We usually have ham or roast beef with green bean casserole, veggies, tamales, rolls or biscuits, Christmas rice, and dessert.

While I love dessert (this is not a surprise to anyone who knows me), Christmas rice has always been one of my favorite dishes. It is a recipe that was first served by my grandmother, GranMax Best, and handed down to her five sons and their children. Basically, we can't have the holiday meal without the Christmas Rice. It's like family glue.

Serve this rice at your Christmas meal and you'll automatically become an honorary Troutte. Welcome to the family!

Ingredients:

2 cups cooked white rice
1 small jar pimientos
2 cups each grated jack and cheddar cheese
2 large cans diced green chilies.
1 large and one small sour cream
15-20 black pitted olives

Directions:

Combine all ingredients except olives. Place in large casserole and garnish with olives across top. Bake at 350 degrees for 45 minutes until heated through.

Serves 10-12.

Yorkshire Pudding by Denise Agnew

I discovered Yorkshire pudding for the first time when I lived in England, and I quickly figured out that I love it! This recipe assumes you're making roast beef to go with the pudding.

Ingredients:

1 ½ cups all-purpose flour
¾ teaspoon salt
¾ cup milk, room temperature
3 eggs, room temperature
¾ cup water
½ cup beef drippings

Directions:

Mix flour and salt together until blended. Make a well in the flour, add milk and whisk. Beat eggs into the batter. Add water and beat again until mixture is light and frothy. Set aside for an hour. When you're ready to cook, allow batter to come up to room temperature before using. Preheat oven to 400 degrees. Pour off drippings from roast beef and measure out about ½ cup. Pour drippings into a 9x12 baking dish and place into the oven until the drippings sizzle. Pour batter over the drippings and bake for 30 minutes. Cut into eight portions and serve immediately. I've also had Yorkshire Puddings that have been poured into muffin pans so you get all these little "precut" puddings.

Holiday Starters

Cooking for Love & Fun for Valentine's the Fast and Munchy treat way by Selena Robins

Valentine's Day is a day to celebrate love and not just for those who are in a relationship or marriage. It's a great excuse to invite some friends over and celebrate friendship or gather your family and have a fun meal. One thing my family loves to do is make a meal out of a variety of finger foods.

Here are a couple of recipes that are popular in our household and are easy to make.

Cheese Filled Romaine Lettuce Cups

Ingredients:

2 cups soft cream cheese

3/4 cup, diced sweet red peppers
2 TBSP chopped fresh basil
1 clove garlic, minced
sea salt and freshly ground black pepper to taste
1 head of fresh romaine lettuce
1 cup toasted pine nuts (or toasted halved pecans)

Directions:

In large bowl, add: cream cheese, red pepper, basil, garlic, salt and pepper and set aside.

Trim bottom off each lettuce leaf, wash, and pat until thoroughly dry.

Spoon 1 TBSP of the cream cheese mixture near the bottom of each romaine lettuce leaf.

Top with either roasted pine nuts or pecans.

Prosciutto Wrapped Peaches

Ingredients:

2 peaches
8 slices prosciutto, thinly sliced
1/3 cup soft goat cheese
2 TBSP prepared basil pesto
16 small arugula leaves, trimmed

Directions:

Add basil pesto to goat cheese and mix well, set aside.

Slice peaches lengthwise into quarters; pit and set aside.

On one slice of prosciutto, evenly spread 2 teaspoons of goat cheese/basil mixture.

Arrange two arugula leaves and one peach quarter at one end of the prosciutto.

Roll up tightly, pressing so the roll is neat.

Repeat with the remaining prosciutto slices.

Cut each roll into 3 pieces and arrange on serving platter.

Hot Artichoke Spread with Crackers by Renee Wildes

Great party tray food—especially when served in a bread bowl. You can also make a variation by adding finely chopped spinach (equal amount to artichoke) and half-again amount of mayo & Parmesan.

Ingredients:

1 14-oz.can artichoke hearts, drained & finely chopped

1 cup real mayo

1 cup grated parmesan cheese

½ tsp. garlic salt

Dash of lemon juice

Directions:

Preheat oven to 350. Lightly grease a 3-cup casserole dish. Combine all of the above ingredients & mix well. Turn into casserole dish & bake for 25 minutes. Serve with assorted crackers.

ABOUT THE BOOK POSSE AUTHORS

Denise Agnew

Denise A. Agnew is the author of over 57 novels. She writes multiple genres within romance. A paranormal investigator, Denise looks forward to exploring the unknown.

Visit Denise's website at <http://deniseagnew.com/>

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Nancy Lauzon is the author of the Chick Dick Mystery novels—fun, romantic mysteries inspired by her love of Nancy Drew. Nancy is dedicating her recipes to the followers and subscribers of [The Chick Dick Mysteries Blog](#).

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A. Catherine Noon

A. Catherine Noon is an author and textile artist based in Chicago, Illinois. She writes novels with Rachel Wilder, who is an author and image consultant in Las Vegas, Nevada. Together, they love to write stories and create worlds for readers to explore and enjoy. This is Noony's first foray into the wilds of food writing, though she loves to incorporate food and cooking in her novels.

To learn more about them, please visit: <http://acatherinenoon.blogspot.com/> and <http://taurusandtaurus.blogspot.com/>.

A. Catherine's Dedication: This one's for Rachel. Here's to that "foreign food." Also to my husband, my favorite chef, and to Mom-Mom, who started it all. I'm proud to be part of the family.

Selena Robins

Selena Robins' novels are described as being witty, suspenseful and humorous. A chocolate guru and foodie, she loves to dance with her dog, sing into her hairbrush and write in comfy clothes. Aside from writing contemporary romance novels, Selena also writes children's books under the pen name, Maddie Ryan. Her recent children's book, *Pippy's Wish* is a best seller on Amazon.

You can chat with Selena on her blog at: <http://selenarobinsmusings.com/> and visit her website to learn about all her work at: <https://selenarobins.com/>

Selena is dedicating her recipes to her sister and brothers, who were her first guinea pigs for her experimentations in the kitchen. She also would like to acknowledge her family, friends and the S.S.S. group for their ongoing love and support. Love you all!

Kimberley Troutte

Kimberley Troutte lives in California with her amazing hubby, two awesome sons, one old dog, four very large snakes and various other creatures that the man/kids/dog inevitably drag in. She has been an accountant, substitute teacher, caterer, financial analyst for a major defense contractor, real-estate broker, aerobics instructor and a freelance writer. Author of *Catch Me in Castile* and *Soul Stealer*, she also writes for children under the name K. Troutte. Look for the boy-adventure *Saving Miner's Gulch* in Spring 2013.

Visit Kimberley at <http://www.kimberleytroutte.com/>

Kimberley's dedication: To Mom who taught me how to cook and more importantly how to love.

Renee Wildes

Renee Wildes is a WI author who wears many hats—Navy brat, cop's kid, only vet tech in family of nurses. She currently writes fantasy romance for Samhain Publishing.

Visit Renee at <http://www.reneewildes.net/>

Renee's Dedication: To Grandma Jeanne, who first called me a writer when I was six. You taught me to expand my creativity in cooking—and the meaning of family. I love you!