

# SHINYCOPPERPIG: what makes life beautiful – and edible

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About me: Java lover, lactose intolerant cheese eater, newbie to the Lone Star State, purveyor of post-apocalyptic books, recently engaged pushover cat disciplinarian. My craftiness ideas are loftier than my skills or patience. Baking makes me feel successful. I require sunlight like a plant. Dark chocolate and whiskey make me happy.

What's with the blog name? My hair is (sometimes) red, my sister named me for a currency and I'm a Razorback. Woo pig sooie!

I blog about once a week – more when I'm procrastinating real-life tasks, less when I'm exploring the gastric delights in my new city of Austin. Did someone say breakfast taco?

### **I Could Eat My Weight In...**

As I sat at the dining room table, licking hummus off a spoon and pondering for the millionth time what an AMAZING food hummus is, it got me thinking: what would I be willing to eat day in and day out without complaint? What would I say to fill in the blank, "I could eat my weight in \_\_\_\_\_."

In no particular order, but with a grumbling hungry tummy, I present a few of the great foods in my life:

**Hummus.** You saw this one coming. I eat it plain, on quinoa, on crackers, on vegetables, on pasta, on sandwiches, on salads. Heck, I've even been known to eat it off my finger. Flavor preferences: smoked paprika, roasted red pepper and classic all do it for me – just keep the kalamata olives away.

**Stacy's Multigrain Pita Chips.** I can't keep these in the house because I simply devour them. I stand in the kitchen, paw in bag, minimal energy exertion moving from bag to mouth, bag to mouth, bag to mouth – pause – chew – repeat. Sometimes their sharp corners pierce the roof of my mouth, and they do take a fair amount of chewing. But they're baked, not fried!

**Tostido's Hint of Lime Chips.** While watching "Mr. Smith Goes to Washington" at DC's Screen on the Green, I once consumed an entire bag of these, alone. I felt ill and had little chemical or salt burns in the corners of my mouth. It was not sexy.

**Goat Cheese.** You know the jingle, “Once you pop, you can’t stop?” That’s me on goat cheese. Once I smear, the end is near. That log of chevrie is going down, and my guts are about to be very, very unhappy. I tested this out about 2 weeks ago. Yep, still lactose intolerant. Damn it.

**Ghirardelli’s Double Chocolate Brownies.** Clearly I’m mostly a savory girl, but these moist, chewy box mix brownies with little melty chunks of dark chocolate hold me hostage. The pan usually disappears while I tell myself, I just need to straighten that edge a bit. Boom. A whole ‘nother row (or line) down. I would post a picture of the actual brownie, but they never last long enough, and a photo couldn’t do it justice anyway.

**Cherry Tomatoes.** They burst in the mouth like a bite of warm sunshine. So easy to carry around and toss ‘em back. Those little containers rarely last more than 2 days. (You can put them with hummus or goat cheese or pita, people!)

**Fresh bread.** Not just any crappy bread, but a warm, crusty loaf of Italian or focaccia, dipped in olive oil swirled with salt and pepper. I’ve made focaccia, and that garlic-salty-rosemary topping is unforgettable. Plus, you get to poke holes in the top of the dough with your fingers. Basically, I will hog the bread basket at dinner.

## **Appetizers & Sides**

**5 Minute 'Pickles'**

**Easy Breezy Tzatziki Dip**

**Thanksgiving Vegetarian Stuffing – maybe the best recipe  
EVER**

**Paneer-Avocado-Mango Salad**

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**Grilled Cheese Perfection**

**Tangy Swiss Chard**

**Pickled Peaches**

**7-Minute Loaded Sweet Potato**

**Battle of the Brown Rice**

**Spicy Corn Dip**

## 5 Minute 'Pickles'

I sometimes whine about cooking when it's hot, and I'm clearly not alone. In fact, *Cooking Light* ran a piece in their July issue about 5-minute sides along with all sorts of shortcuts to avoid the kitchen. It's not just me!

I made their recipe for Greek Salad Cucumbers for an impromptu picnic dinner. It's less like a salad or a side and more like super-fast pickles. And they are awesome: crunchy, salty and satisfying on a sticky evening. Plus they're apparently quite healthy.

- 1 English cucumber, cut into quarters lengthwise and then crosswise
- 2 tablespoons red wine vinegar
- 2 teaspoons extra-virgin olive oil
- 1/4 teaspoon sugar
- 1/4 teaspoon kosher salt
- 1/4 teaspoon black pepper
- 1 ounce feta cheese, crumbled
- 1 tablespoon finely chopped fresh dill

Combine all the ingredients in a bowl and swirl around to coat the cucumbers. I misread "red wine vinegar" as "rice vinegar," only to realize 1/4 tsp of the way through that I was out of rice vinegar. I switched to white vinegar before realizing it actually listed red wine vinegar. And I failed to measure anything. Ya know what? It didn't matter one bit; they were still delish.

Taste and adjust to preference. The leftover liquid made a nice cracker dip too.

## Easy Breezy Tzatziki Dip

The bf and I are trying to eat a primarily Mediterranean diet, not for any particular health reason but that it's good for ya and full of foods we both like. Yesterday we totally fell off the wagon when entertaining and faced with Rotel cheese dip, potato chips, scoops and Miller High Life. I tried to keep it healthy by serving up tzatziki dip with carrots and cucumbers. Those were gone in about 10 minutes and the chip-n-dip era ensued.

Tzatziki is a delightful Greek dip that pairs equally well with veggies, meats, pita and salads. After hummus, it's my next favorite go-to spread. Don't be fooled by the pre-made kind at the store. I'm all for convenience—egg whites in a carton, microwavable rice, bagged baby carrots—but the store-bought kind doesn't compare, and often is made with sour cream. I started with this recipe and played around til I got the flavors just right:

- 1 (32 oz) container plain Greek yogurt – My favorite is fat-free Fage. You can use regular nonfat yogurt, but the consistency will be thinner
- 1/2 cucumber with peel, grated
- 2 cloves garlic, minced
- 1/4 cup finely diced white onion
- 2 TBS fresh lemon juice
- 1-2 TBS+ extra-virgin olive oil
- Zest of 1 lemon
- 3 TBS chopped fresh dill
- 1 tsp salt
- Pepper to taste



Stir together yogurt, grated cucumber, garlic, lemon juice, and olive oil in a bowl. Add lemon zest, dill, salt, and pepper until smooth. Pour into a serving dish, cover tightly, and refrigerate at least 4 hours before serving.

Makes about 5 cups of dip, which will be consumed much more quickly than you expect! Serve with warmed pita wedges and cucumbers. Halving the recipe works well too.

## Stuffing So Good You'll Forget It's Vegetarian

My family is comprised of solid omnivores. We hail from a state that exports chicken, folks. Come a holiday meal, there may be bacon, sausage, duck or chicken in every dish — often several at once when gumbo graces the table. Last Christmas we made an English goose and fried everything in goose fat. We've adopted The Barefoot Contessa's stuffing recipe as the gold standard. My dad recently killed a deer in the backyard with a crossbow and is busy crafting new venison stew recipes. We are meat-o-saurauses.

This Thanksgiving, however, I spent the holiday with two meat eaters and one vegetarian. To keep it inclusive, we made everything except the turkey vegetarian friendly. I chose stuffing and mashed potatoes as my dishes, which offered the challenge of how to create a delectable stuffing that wouldn't make me notice the lack of meat. I'd also never made stuffing from scratch thanks to Pepperidge Farm's bags of dried bread bits. After much hemming and hawing, I settled on this recipe for Vanishing Stuffing by Vegetarian with Benefits.

All I can say is that this was the first dish of leftovers we polished off — in under 24 hours. There were rave reviews by vegetarians and carnivores alike. If I'd known how well it'd turn out, I'd have doubled the recipe to bring home a tupperware for myself! As is, this makes one 9x13 pan of 6-8 servings, depending on the size of your appetites. It took about 90 minutes start to finish, mostly because my knife skills leave something to be desired.

### Ingredients

- 1 loaf Italian or French bread
- 8 TBS butter (1 stick)
- 16 oz mixed mushrooms, chopped – include shiitake if possible
- 2-3 large carrots, sliced
- 1 medium onion, diced
- 1/3 cup cranberry sauce, whole berry or jellied
- 1/3 cup dried cranberries
- 2 cups vegetable stock
- 10 sprigs fresh thyme, chopped finely
- 10 leaves fresh sage, chopped finely
- 8 leaves fresh basil, chopped finely
- 2 sprigs rosemary, chopped finely
- 4 TBS parsley, chopped
- salt and pepper
- 4 TBS+ olive oil
- Instructions



1. Preheat the oven to 350 F

2. Cut the bread into small cubes, aiming to keep them under a square inch. Spread the bread cubes evenly on 2 baking sheets. Toast the bread in the oven until browning – careful not to burn! This took about 10 minutes, with checks every few minutes.

3. In a large stock pot or large sauce pan fry the onion with a couple TBS of butter and a couple TBS of olive oil. Saute onions until translucent. Add mushrooms and carrots. Saute on medium low heat until mushrooms are soft, about 5 minutes. Add more butter and olive oil to keep bits from sticking and over-browning.

TIP: Since you'll be chopping and stirring for a good bit, keep a glass of wine handy. The art of pairing wines with food is largely a matter of personal preference however, some safe bets for Thanksgiving wines are Pinot Noir, Syrah and Zinfandel. We enjoyed all three!

4. Add the thyme, sage, basil, rosemary, and 3 TBS of the parsley. Add 2 cups of vegetable stock. Allow to simmer for a couple of minutes then add the bread cubes. Turn off the heat. Stir from the bottom up, folding the contents like soft whipped cream to keep the cubes from getting too broken up or drenched. Add additional butter and/or olive oil as needed. Mix in the cranberry sauce and dried cranberries. Salt and pepper to preference. Sample. Yes, grab a spoon and taste it!

5. Transfer the stuffing to a buttered baking pan. Top with thin slices of the remaining butter before putting it in the oven. Bake until the top is golden brown and crunchy – about 40 minutes. When it's done baking, top it with remaining 1 TBS parsley. Indulge!

Like any new recipe, this one could be tweaked with additional ingredients and experimentation: toasted pecans, green apples, chopped celery...sweet Italian sausage...



## Make-at-Home Indian - Paneer, Avocado and Mango Salad

I had the good fortune of hosting a birthday dinner last weekend, and decided to try my hand at Indian. Thanks to “Real Fast Indian Food” by Mridula Baljekar, the meal only took 2 hours to make. Fortunately, my friends are patient.

This recipe is actually quick – a delightful salty sweet combination, perfect for summer. It’s also great for feeding the hungry while willing the rice to cook faster.

- 2 TBS peanut oil (or other high heat oil)
- 1.5 tsp ground, roasted cumin
- 1/2 tsp red chili flakes
- 1/2 tsp ground coriander
- 1 tsp coriander seeds
- 3 TBS chopped cilantro
- 1 TBS chopped, fresh mint mandarin
- salt and pepper
- 2 avocados
- Juice of 1 lemon
- 2 ripe, but firm, mangoes
- 10 oz queso fresco, cut into bite sized squares (It’s supposed to be paneer or halloumi cheese, but I couldn’t find any)



1. Heat oil in a pan over medium heat. Add cumin and red pepper flake. Immediately add the cheese and fry over medium-high heat until at least 2 sides of the cheese pieces are browned. Yes, you will have to flip them – carefully. The queso fresco held up well for ~ 8 minutes, at which point it started getting too soft to flip.

2. Turn off the heat and remove pan from stove. Add coriander, cilantro and mint to pan with fried cheese. Let cool.  
FACTOID: coriander is the seed from the cilantro plant.

3. Halve the avocado and cut the insides into small-ish cubes. Scoop out into a bowl and toss with lemon juice. Peel the mangoes and cut the flesh into similar sized pieces as the avocado, add to bowl with avocado. Add the cheese mixture from the pan into the bowl with the avocado-mango mixture. Mix gently and thoroughly to coat the fruit in spices. Add salt and pepper to taste.

4. Line a large platter or bowl with crisp lettuce. Spoon mixture on top of lettuce and sprinkle with additional chopped cilantro and/or mint. Attempt to make cute lettuce wraps. Give up and eat with a fork.

## Ode to Beets

I am digging on beets this week. Growing up I occasionally ate the pickled beets set out at salad bars, but I'm not sure that I'd eat a raw beet until this week. And I'd certainly never cut one up before. Why I'm digging this dusty vegetable:

**The Color.** It pops! It's chipper! It says ruddy and happy and outdoorsy with its bright hue. My new google obsession is to find the perfect lipstick or lipstain to match. Perhaps I'll make my own. Just kidding! I ordered some from Etsy instead.

**The Crunch.** It's kind of like a carrot, or a parsnip, or a raw potato, but it's also somehow softer and subtly sweeter.

**The Combo with Goat Cheese.** Goat cheese is one of my top 3 favorite cheeses, and how conveniently and tastefully it pairs with chevrie! I enjoyed a beet salad at Rustico last weekend, and am hankering to make my own Beet and Goat Cheese Arugula Salad.

**The Stain.** Seeing my fingers and lips this ruddy hue throws me back to being a kid, suckling on purple popsicles or red slushies, drinking neon orange Kool-aid and spastic blue pixie stix. It's so bright! I'm smiling even as I type.

**The Beatnik.** I was looking up some literature on beets and stumbled across a poem written about beets. I mean, how many people write poems about asparagus or acorn squash or oranges? This is the good stuff. For your reading pleasure:

the blood red ukranians have food  
to match their humanity and its life  
blood food no reason for those two  
vowels not to sound the same like  
the rock and roll difference thats  
between borscht and beatles black sea  
and england is famous for its  
music spelled wrong not song  
just secretly edible roots  
with two ee beatnik  
misappropriated  
– Zach Houston

## Italian Tomato-Basil Tart

Easy and flavorful, this dish was a total hit among my bookclub ladies! I had several requests for the recipe, which is adapted from a Cooking Light reader-submitted recipe. My version is slightly less healthy, and quicker to make.

### Crust:

- 1 10.5 oz package precooked brown rice (I used Trader Joe's)
- 2 TBS commercial pesto
- 1/4 cup grated Parmesan cheese
- 1 egg
- Cooking spray

### Filling:

- 1/2 cup milk (I used 2%)
- 3 eggs
- 1/4 tsp. salt
- 1/4 tsp. black pepper
- 1/4 tsp. crushed red pepper
- 1 cup mozzarella cheese
- 1 link Italian chicken sausage, sliced into thin strips. I used Al Fresco's, but you could also try 1 ounce prosciutto, or 1/4 cup crumbled cooked bacon – or go meat free!
- 4 small, flavorful tomatoes, thinly sliced. The original recipe called for plum tomatoes but I used Kumato brown tomatoes because they are just darn good!
- 2 TBS chopped fresh basil, or a 4 inch ribbon of basil in a tube (the grocery store was out of fresh, I'm not just lazy)

1. Preheat oven to 350 degrees F. Spray a 9-inch pie plate with cooking spray.
2. In a bowl, combine packaged rice, Parmesan, 1 egg, and pesto. Press the mixture into the sprayed pie plate, firmly smooching it into the bottom and up the sides of the dish. It will be a bit crumbly. Bake at 350 degrees for 15 minutes, then remove from oven.
3. Increase the oven temperature to 400 degrees F.
4. Combine milk, 3 eggs, salt, peppers and basil in a bowl. Whisk it together.
5. Sprinkle half of the mozzarella and half of the chicken sausage into the bottom of the prepared crust. Top with half of the tomato slices. Repeat another layer with remaining mozzarella, sausage and yummy tomatoes. Pour the milk/egg mixture over the contents in the pan.
6. Bake at 400 degrees for 10 minutes. Reduce the oven temperature to 325 degrees while leaving the tart in the oven. Bake an additional 35 minutes or until set. Enjoy hot or cold!

## Perfect Grilled Cheese

“Nom...yum...sooo...nummy. mmmm...”

My personal favorite combo of cheese: queso fresco and a local tomme raw milk cheese.

Oh, and *\*secret chef tip\** in case you're in the market for the world's best grilled cheese – and who isn't? – the key [she looks both ways] is frying your grilled cheese in mayonnaise. Our official unscientific experiment of butter vs. mayonnaise showed mayo led the tasting results.



### [Why You Should Fry Your Grilled Cheese in Mayonnaise:](#)

*We've already featured Jamie Oliver's toasted cheese and Nora's Dad's grilled cheese this week. Now it's time for a gilled cheese tip from Blood, Bones and Butter author Gabrielle Hamilton, as revealed in the Holiday issue of Canal House Cooking. Her unusual grilled cheese method? Spreading the outsides of the bread with mayonnaise instead of butter before frying. This was something I had to try!*

*First, let me say this: I know some people might be unsure about 'hot mayonnaise' but using a store-bought brand (nothing but Hellman's/Best Foods is allowed in my kitchen) is perfectly safe. While it's somewhat unusual, I have used mayo in hot dishes before (such as in hot dips) with no problems and excellent results.*

*Ms. Hamilton instructs us to spread the outsides of the sandwich with mayo (she, too, is a Hellman's fan) and fry it up in a non-stick skillet over lowish heat. I gave it a try with a simple whole grain bread and a nice, sharp cheddar. The results? Sublime! The mayo browned nicely into a delicious crust and offered a rich, slightly tangy flavor.*

*Gabrielle Hamilton (whose sister Melissa Hamilton is co-author of the Canal House Cooking series) served her grilled cheese sandwiches to company at Christmastime, along with glasses of chilled, crisp champagne. Besides the usual cheddar with mustard, she also made a blue cheese and bacon on pumpernickel and cheddar with mango and jalapeno. Yum!*

Sauce adapted from Pretty.Good. Food.

## Tangy Swiss Chard

Last night was a good night of results. I took Bobby Flay's Sautéed Kale recipe. The result? Sharp lemon punches and zingy vinegar-soaked swiss chard. The Penney-fied version:

- 1 bunch swiss chard, stems removed and leaves chopped up roughly (the bright red stems on dark green make it festive for a holiday dish)
- 3 TBS olive oil
- 1 tsp. minced garlic
- 1/2 cup chicken broth
- 2 tsp rice vinegar
- salt and pepper

1. Heat olive oil in a large saucepan over medium-high heat. Add the garlic and dash of salt, and cook until soft, but not colored.

2. Raise heat to high, add broth and toss to combine. Cover and cook for 5 minutes.

3. Remove cover and continue to cook for 1 minute. Stir in vinegar and cook another minute. Salt and pepper to taste.

Note: This serves 2 people as it wilts down to nearly nothing. Increasing the amount of swiss chard will likely require additional cooking time.

## Pickled Peaches

I bought 12 peaches. One molded and attracted a hoard of fruit flies that made me nearly gag. I didn't want to throw them all away (expensive!), so I stuck them in the freezer to bide my time and kill any remaining flies. That was 5 weeks ago. Here's my plan: pickled peaches from Saveur. Any tips for a first time pickler?

### INGREDIENTS

- 3½ cups sugar
- 1½ cups white vinegar
- 14–16 ripe medium peaches, peeled
- 8 whole cloves
- 2 sticks cinnamon
- 1" piece ginger, peeled and thinly sliced

### INSTRUCTIONS

1. Bring a canning pot of water to a boil. Submerge 2 one-quart canning jars and their lids and ring bands in boiling water; sterilize equipment for 10 minutes. Remove from boiling water with tongs, draining jars, and transfer to a clean dish towel.
2. Combine sugar, vinegar, and 1½ cups water in a heavy medium-size pot and bring to a boil over medium-high heat, stirring until sugar dissolves. Working in batches slide peaches into the pickling liquid and cook, turning once or twice, until peaches soften but before they turn fuzzy, 4–5 minutes per batch. Transfer peaches to a bowl as done.
3. Divide cloves, cinnamon, and ginger between the 2 jars. Cut any peaches with brown spots into halves or quarters, discarding pits, and trim away the brown spots. Spoon peaches into the jars, filling the gaps with the halves and quarters and packing the jars as tightly as possible.
4. Return pickling liquid to a boil, then pour boiling liquid into each jar, covering peaches and filling jar to 1/4" from the rims. Let liquid settle in jars, then add more boiling liquid as necessary. Discard any remaining liquid. Wipe jar rims with a clean dish towel, place lids on jars, and screw on ring bands.
5. Transfer filled jars to a canning rack, submerge in a canning pot of gently boiling water (jars should be covered by at least 1" of water), and process for 10 minutes. Carefully lift jars from water with jar tongs and place on a dish towel at least 1" apart to let cool undisturbed for 24 hours. To test that jars have properly sealed, press on center of each lid. Remove your finger; if lid stays down, it's sealed. Refrigerate any jars of pickled peaches that aren't sealed; use within 4 weeks.

MAKES 2 QUARTS

## 7-Minute Loaded (Vegan) Sweet Potato

I really should have taken a picture of this beauty, but I was freaking hungry and needed to eat. That packet of miso soup at 4pm was not cuttin' it. Hence, this magical creation – ready in 7 minutes flat. Warm, filling, flavorful and crazy healthy. Did I mention fast?

Ingredients:

- 1 medium sweet potato
- 1/2 can can red kidney beans, drained
- 1/2 ripe avocado
- 1/2 cup salsa of choice – I went for medium chunky (horrible name)
- 1 tsp good quality olive oil – the light flavored, green-grass scented stuff
- salt to taste

Directions:

1. Rinse sweet potato and wrap in plastic wrap. Poke a few holes through the wrap into the potato. Place wrapped potato in a bowl in the microwave. My wimpy microwave leftover from grad school took 5.5 minutes to cook. Yours will likely take 4-6 minutes depending on wattage.

TIP: Sure, you can bake the potatoes in the oven. That'll take one hour at 400 degrees Fahrenheit. Just making a point about efficiency here.

2. While potato is cooking, open and drain the kidney beans. Slice the avocado. Once the potato is cooked until it's easy to pierce with a fork, pull it out of the microwave with oven mitts. Seriously, y'all, I've screamed profane things in the office kitchen while burning off my fingerprints attempting to pull bowls out of the microwave by hand.

3. Slice potato in half in the bowl. Fill with 1/2 can of kidney beans and 1/2 cup of salsa. Zap in the microwave 1 additional minute. Remove carefully and top with sliced avocado, drizzle with olive oil and salt to taste.

Ta da! Your entire meal can be made and consumed in less time than it takes to watch an episode of The Daily Show. Ooh, this recipe for stuffed sweet potatoes with greens and beans looks promising too. Or this one, kale and quinoa stuffed sweet potatoes. I've found my inner yam monster! Plus, tomorrow I'm taking the leftover beans, avocado and salsa to work for stuffing in a pita pocket.

I ate this with a glass of red wine from the Cote du Rhone that was on sale at the store. I didn't like it enough to list the wine here, but I'm sure a little sweeter wine could go nicely. A drier Riesling perhaps, or a Zinfandel?

## Battle of the Brown Rice

I usually default to brown rice. It tastes just as good as white rice, it's better for me, plus it's one easy, healthy choice I can make. But if you've read any posts of late, you're keenly aware that I'm in a lazy cooking slump. As in, most of my meals I made this weekend consisted of salads, hummus, chicken pot stickers, canned soup, spaghetti, peanut butter or frozen meals. Sad, I know, but it's more economical than eating out all the time. I did try a new place this weekend that hit the spot, though: Bayou Bakery.

I rallied last night and went for an easy, 20 minute, one-pan Chickpea Curry Tomato Stew. (How is it possible I haven't posted about this recipe before?! I make it at least once a month. Double the spices, by the way). It's my version of quick, healthy Indian. In deciding what to serve the stew over, my options included:

- Trader Joe's Quinoa— Ready in 20 minutes
- Trader Joe's frozen brown rice packets— Ready in 3 minutes
- Trader Joe's precooked brown rice pouch – Ready in 90 seconds
- Whole grain brown rice – Ready in 60 minutes if you're lucky
- Uncle Ben's brown rice pouch – Ready in 90 seconds

My brown rice recommendations, in order of preference – based on ease and quality:

1. **TJ's frozen brown rice packets.** The little bit of steaming in the microwave fluffs up the grains, and 3 minutes is still fast as can be.
2. **TJ's quinoa.** I like the feeling of the quinoa grains bursting a bit in my mouth. I know this isn't a rice, but its nutritional profile supersedes all other grains and it was in the running for dinner. The time requirement is the limiting factor for why it's not #1 on my list. Tip: Don't over-water quinoa, as it easily turns soggy.
3. **TJ's precooked rice pouch.** The rice grains are a little more chewy, less fluffy, and a bit tougher than the frozen rice. Don't let this rice cool or it'll dehydrate quickly. But still, the ingredient list is simple and I can handle a 90 second wait.
4. **Uncle Ben's precooked rice pouch.** The ingredient list on this one is oddly long. Check all of Uncle Ben's packets; many contain palm oil, hydrogenated oil, sugar, corn syrup, and unknown 'natural flavors.' It also feels a bit greasy on the tongue.
5. It's pretty obvious, right? **Whole grain brown rice and I aren't friends.** It takes FOR-EV-ERRR (said in a Sandlot voice), and is perpetually either undercooked or burned. I know it's economical, but it's just not worth the waste of soggy or crunchy rice.





## Spicy corn dip

I had a suburban American fall Sunday yesterday. 15 folks hanging out – boys playing touch football in the backyard while the sun set. Ladies in the kitchen catching up, fussing over plating food, drinking beer and wine. NFL football on two television sets. A couple getting married in 5 days. A girl waiting for a ring. No babies, but a cat. A uproarious round of Game of Things. Beer, beer, beer.

And a hefty table full of food. I mean, HEFTY. No one brought the same two items, and we enjoyed: sloppy joes, veggie chili, cornbread, humus with pita chips, cheese trio and crackers, cheesy crab melts, chips and salsa, mini veggie pizzas, raw veggies and dip, stuffed marinated mushrooms.

I made a crowd pleaser: spicy corn dip. This recipe is adapted from my foodie aunt.

### Spicy Corn Dip

- 1 – 15 oz. can yellow corn, drained
- 1 – 16 oz. package frozen white corn
- 1 – 8 oz. cream cheese –
- 1 – can Rotel (drain most of the juice)
- 1 – 4 oz. can diced green chilies
- 1/4 cup chopped fresh cilantro
- 1 Tbs. chili powder (Ancho chili preferably)
- 1 clove garlic, minced
- 1 tsp. cumin
- Dash of paprika

Soften cream cheese and mix with spices until blended. Add Rotel and mix. Add green chilies and cilantro and mix. Add corns and mix well. Bake at 350 degrees for 20 to 25 minutes, stirring at least once. Serve with Frito Scoops. Watch it disappear!

## Breads and Doughs

- **Copycat Starbucks Iced Lemon Poundcake**
- **Copycat Red Lobster Cheesy Biscuits**
- **DIY Pita Bread**
- **“Holy Crap this is Good” Pumpkin Bread**
- **Puff Pastry Breadsticks**
- **Chocolate Chip Zucchini Bread**

## Starbucks' Iced Lemon Pound Cake

Lemon zest and juice makes all edible items brighter: hot tea, roasted vegetables, baked goods, alcohol, salad, yogurt. I challenge you — what does NOT taste better with lemon? While you ponder deep thoughts, lemme share this copycat recipe for Starbucks' lemon pound cake. It's killer: zingy, dense, sweet, soft. I froze half of my original loaf and thawed it a couple weeks later — still delicious.

Yesterday I sampled the original loaf at Starbucks while shopping with a friend — and I have to say that this recipe is actually better. My version has more icing, less grease, less thud in the stomach and less guilt. Apparently we all owe Todd Wilbur our thanks for tinkering to find the secret ingredient: lemon extract. I made a few tweaks, but the basics are his.

"It would take quite a bit of real lemon juice to give this moist cake loaf clone the perfect lemony tang of the original. To avoid producing a batter that's too runny, we must turn to lemon extract that can be found near vanilla extract in your supermarket. This concentrated lemon flavoring works well with real lemon juice to give us the intense lemon flavor we need. Plus this extract adds just the right amount of lemon goodness to the icing without thinning it out."

### Ingredients

- 1 1/2 cups all-purpose flour
- 1/2 tsp baking soda
- 1/2 tsp baking powder
- 1/2 tsp salt
- 3 eggs
- 1 cup granulated sugar
- 2 TBS salted butter, softened
- 1 tsp vanilla extract
- 1 tsp lemon extract
- 1/3 cup lemon juice
- 1/2 cup vegetable oil
- zest of 1 lemon



### —Lemon Icing—

- 1 cup powdered sugar
- 1-2 TBS milk or milk-product, if needed, for blending to smoothness. (My lactose-intolerant self used coconut milk).
- 1/2 tsp+ lemon extract
- 1 tsp lemon juice
- zest of one lemon

### Instructions

1. Preheat oven to 350° F. Use an electric mixer (or Kitchen Aid) to blend together eggs, sugar, butter, vanilla, lemon extract, lemon zest & lemon juice in a large bowl.
2. Combine flour, baking soda, baking powder & salt in a medium bowl. Add dry ingredient into wet ingredients & blend until smooth. Add oil and mix well.

3. Pour ingredients into a well-greased 9×5-inch loaf pan. I also lined mine with parchment paper — optional. Bake for 45-55 minutes or until a toothpick stuck into the center of the cake comes out clean.
4. Make the lemon icing by combining ingredients in a small bowl with electric mixer on low speed. I used my immersion blender instead for efficiency's sake — or laziness. For me, the icing makes this cake. It's not a thin glaze; it's a stand up straight and melt-in-your-mouth icing.
5. When the lemon loaf is cool, remove it from the pan & frost the top with the lemon icing. When the icing has set up, slice the loaf into eight 1-inch-thick slices. It seriously looks and tastes and delights as much as the original. Rock on, lemon luxuriousness.

## Red Lobster Cheesy Biscuits

Recently given a choice between dining at a hole-in-the wall Cuban restaurant, a Mom 'n Pop Indian food spot and a local Irish pub, I chose Red Lobster. It's inexplicable. Folks, I haven't been to Red Lobster in...[counts on both hands]...6 years? Yet all I wanted in that moment were baskets of cheddar bay biscuits.

After appropriately stuffing my face with four course for \$14.99 including unlimited biscuits, I was quite happy – and also curious. How hard is it to make their famous biscuits? A Google search reveals a host of copycat recipes but I wanted one with instant gratification. Enter this super easy recipe from Love Bakes Good Cakes.

Drawback: that whole lactose intolerance thing means I don't keep dairy milk or shredded cheddar cheese around. Turns out, it doesn't matter! The almond milk and veggie shreds incorporated perfectly, along a few tweaks for personal preference. I just ate 3 of these babies, 2 with ham and mustard and honey, and one straight up. Ho boy, this is going in the stack of new favorites:

### Ingredients

- 2 cups Bisquick mix
- $\frac{2}{3}$  cup milk – I used almond
- $\frac{1}{2}$  cup cheddar cheese, shredded – I used Go Veggie! Parmesan, Mozzarella and Romano blend
- 1 TB butter, melted
- 2 TBS margarine, divided
- 1 tsp. olive oil
- $\frac{1}{8}$  tsp. Old Bay seasoning
- 1 tsp. parsley flakes
- $\frac{1}{8}$  tsp. salt
- $\frac{1}{8}$  tsp. garlic powder – I used onion powder

### Directions

1. Preheat oven to 450°F.
2. In a medium bowl, combine the Bisquick, milk and cheese until a soft dough forms. Drop by 9 spoonfuls onto an ungreased baking sheet. Top each biscuit with a spread of margarine (see picture 1).
3. Bake for 8-10 minutes or until golden brown on the tops and sides. Remove from oven. top each biscuit with another sliver of margarine. (I'm not going for health here, people, and these biscuits need salty tops).
4. In a small bowl, combine the melted butter, 1 TBS margarine, olive oil, Old Bay, salt, garlic or onion powder and parsley. Brush the butter mixture over the warm biscuits.
5. Eat! Repeat.

Next time I'll probably use faux cheddar cheese to obtain that classic orange color, and garlic powder in the butter topping blend. But I am very pleased overall. To boot, the entire process took 15 minutes!

I wonder how many I can eat before the bf notices?

## DIY Pita Bread

This recipe works! Two successful batches later I am beside and puffed up like a proud penguin. I MAKE BREAD. Edible, tasty, looks-like-store bought bread. Raawwwr. Thanks to the Wimbush Family Pita Bread recipe for the instructions and confidence.

- 1 TBS yeast (Equals one of those square yeast packages that comes in sets of 3 in the baking aisle)
- 1 ¼ cup warm tap water
- 1 1/2 tsp salt
- 1 cup whole wheat flour (This makes it taste better and is healthier)
- 2 – 2 ½ cups all-purpose white flour
- You're gonna want an electric mixer too

Dissolve the yeast in water for about 5 minutes in the bowl of an electric mixer. Add salt and whole wheat flour plus ½ cup of white flour. With the dough hook attachment, beat to make a batter. Add additional flour until a rough, shaggy mass is formed. (It will break apart and look kinda rough). Add a bit more flour and knead 6-8 minutes until dough is smooth and elastic. (It will form a cohesive glob on the hook).

Turn dough onto a lightly floured surface and divide into 6 pieces for larger pitas or 10 for smaller. Add more flour if it is too sticky. Form dough into balls, then flatten with a rolling-pin into ¼ inch thick discs. TIP: Try and keep an even thickness as this is what helps them 'puff'. Thinner ones cook faster and puff more; thicker ones turn out more like a naan bread.

Lightly flour 2-3 cookie sheets and set on top of the stove. Preheat to 425 F. With a large spatula or your hands, move the flattened disks to the cookie sheets. Let them rest on the floured surface on or near the stove for 30-40 minutes until slightly puffed. Don't worry if they don't double in size or look perceptibly larger. They're okay. You should be able to smell the yeast and when you poke 'em, your finger should leave a little dent. If not, whatever — worst case scenario is that you'll make crackers instead of pitas.

Bake 10-15 minutes until light golden. Stick around for the first five minutes of baking when the pitas perform their magic and puff up from flat pancakes to proud, four-inch high pitas. It's epic. Store bought and the Pioneer Woman ain't got nuthin' on me!

Cool completely before storing or risk stale pitas. Apparently you can also freeze 'em, but they haven't stuck around long enough yet for me to attest to that.

## “Holy Crap This is Good” Pumpkin Bread

This pumpkin bread earned me the following unsolicited tweet from my boyfriend: “You can all stop making pumpkin bread now, @penneysage just won. Holy crap this is good.”

Combining recipes from My Baking Addiction and Allrecipe’s with a desire to make the bread a tad bit healthier so I could feel better about eating multiple servings a day, I may have stumbled upon the perfect pumpkin bread:

### Ingredients:

- 1 (15 ounce) can pumpkin puree
- 4 eggs
- 1/3 cup vegetable oil (I used peanut oil)
- 2/3 cup unsweetened applesauce
- 2/3 cup water
- 2 tsps pure vanilla extract
- 2 1/2 cups sugar
- 3 1/2 cups all-purpose flour
- 2 tsps baking soda
- 1 1/2 tsps kosher salt
- 1 tsp ground cinnamon
- 1 tsp ground nutmeg
- 1/2 tsp ground cloves
- 1/4 tsp + ground ginger
- 1 TBS butter (optional)

### Directions:

1. Preheat oven to 350 degrees F. Grease two 8.5 x 4 x 2.5 inch loaf pans. Or, since I only own one loaf pan I substituted a second glass pie pan. This was perhaps the best decision I made all day. Not only did the pie pan version cook faster, but there were no burned edges or a raw center that sometimes happens with loaf breads. It’s like a cross between cornbread and gingerbread and pumpkin pie. *{Pause for a moment and take that in.}*
2. In the bowl of a stand mixer or in a large bowl with an electric mixer, combine pumpkin, eggs, oil, water, vanilla, applesauce and sugar until well blended.
3. Add all the dry ingredients, layering in the order listed, then mix until just blended. Pour batter into the prepared pans. It will be a thin batter; don’t worry.
5. Bake in preheated oven. For the circular pie pan, bake ~45 minutes. For the loaf, bake 60-70 minutes or until a toothpick inserted in the center comes out clean and the center doesn’t jiggle. As soon as the bread emerges from the oven, melt 1/2 TBS butter over the top.

I’ll likely enjoy this toasted and topped with cream cheese in the morning, but whipped cream or ice cream or butter would rock too. Perhaps I’ll have another wedge with tea and a night cap.



## Slap-Your-Mother-Good Puffy Pastry Breadsticks

What do you make on a rainy day to accompany afternoon wine with friends? Puff pastry breadsticks!

### Ingredients

- 1 (17.3-ounce) package frozen puff pastry sheets, thawed
- 1 cup freshly grated Parmesan
- 1 teaspoon dried basil or 2 TBS fresh basil
- 1/4 teaspoon garlic powder
- 1/4 cup butter, melted



### Directions

These are absurdly easy and ridiculously tasty. Preheat oven to 400 degrees F. Lightly grease a baking sheet. On a lightly floured surface or wax paper, unfold thawed pastry sheets. (It took about 30 minutes to thaw on the counter) Cut each pastry sheet into 8 strips, about 1 inch wide, or narrower if you prefer.

In a small bowl, melt the butter. In a separate shallow dish, combine cheese, basil, and garlic powder. Brush pastry sticks with melted butter. Roll pastry sticks in cheese mixture, coating each side. This gets a bit messy, with patting basil and cheese onto the buttered dough to get it to stick to both sides. The dough will be soft.

Gently twist pastry sticks, and place on a prepared baking sheet.

Bake for 10-12 minutes, checking after 10 minutes. Remove to wire racks to cool or eat them all – immediately! I didn't even have a chance to take an 'after' picture of their golden deliciousness.

Thanks to Paula Deen for the recipe inspiration!

## Chocolate Chip Zucchini Bread

“Love doesn’t just sit there like a stone; it has to be made, like bread, remade all the time, made new.” — Ursula K. Le Guin

For my love this weekend, I plan to make one of his favorite sweets, Chocolate Chip Zucchini Bread. This is the recipe I prefer – it reduces calorie guilt, even if I do add more chocolate than it calls for.

### Ingredients

- 3/4 cup sugar
- 3 tablespoons vegetable oil
- 2 large eggs
- 1 cup applesauce
- 2 cups all-purpose flour
- 2 tablespoons unsweetened cocoa
- 1 1/4 teaspoons baking soda
- 1 teaspoon ground cinnamon
- 1/4 teaspoon salt
- 1 1/2 cups finely shredded zucchini (about 1 medium)
- 1/2 cup semisweet chocolate chips
- Cooking spray

### Preparation

Preheat oven to 350°.

Place first 3 ingredients in a large bowl; beat with a mixer at low speed until well blended. Stir in applesauce.

Lightly spoon flour into dry measuring cups; level with a knife. Combine flour and the next 4 ingredients (through salt), stirring well with a whisk. Add flour mixture to sugar mixture, beating just until moist. Stir in the zucchini and chocolate chips. Spoon batter into a 9 x 5-inch loaf pan coated with cooking spray. Bake at 350° for 1 hour or until a wooden pick inserted in center comes out almost clean. Cool in pan 10 minutes on a wire rack, and remove from pan. Cool completely on wire rack.

## **Breakfast**

- **Breakfast “Cookies”**
- **Pumpkin Cream Cheese Cinnamon Rolls**
- **Mom’s Pumpkin Muffins**
- **Frittata, the Lazy Man’s Eggs**
- **Parfait, Donkey’s Favorite Food**
- **Quiche ‘Muffins’**
- **Bacon & Peanut Butter Sammy**

## Breakfast Cookies

I have a friend in Austin, the Maple Syrup Lady, who produces maple syrup in Michigan, then hauls and sells it here in Texas. Part of her business is blogging about recipes. This week she tried a new 'breakfast cookie' recipe and I had the pleasure of sampling the results.

Let's just say my bag of 6 cookies lasted 2 days, and that took restraint. They're soft and fluffy, moist, tangy, and just the right amount of crunch. They're like less refined Lara Bars, only WAY less expensive. Not to mention that they're chock full of fruits and grains, no refined sugar, no butter, no eggs – and potentially gluten free. (If you're into that). Who doesn't want to eat cookies for breakfast?!

### Ingredients

- 1 Cup Unsweetened Applesauce
- 2 Mashed Bananas
- 2 Tbsp Pure Michigan Maple Syrup
- 1/2 Cup Raisins or Dried Cranberries
- 1/4 Cup Chopped Almonds
- 1 Cup Fresh Strawberries, Diced
- 1 Tsp Cinnamon
- 1/4 Tsp Sea Salt
- 1 1/2 Cups Rolled Oats



### Directions

1. Preheat oven to 350 degrees.
2. Combine the applesauce, mashed bananas, and maple syrup in a medium sized bowl. Add in the dried fruit, nuts, strawberries, cinnamon, and sea salt. Fold in the rolled oats.
3. Use an ice cream scoop to make 16 cookies. The dough will be loose so pack them together and press down on the middle to make a cookie shape. Place on a prepared baking sheet and bake for 30 minutes.

And yes, the Maple Lady has an online store and ships!

The recipe makes 16-18 cookies per batch – 80 calories per cookie.

## Pumpkin Cream Cheese Cinnamon Rolls

Kudos to the bakers over at Food52 for crafting this delicious recipe. I made these on Christmas morning, and though they take a fair amount of time to create and more than enough calories, the flavors make for a celebration. Plus, did you notice they use pumpkin? My pursuit to teach the world that pumpkin is more than a fall food continues.

I learned a couple things that will make my next batch even better:

- Adjust the oven down 25 degrees for a glass pan.
- Measure the icing ingredients.
- Clementine zest and juice are not culinary equivalents to orange zest and juice.
- Despite my insistence that it didn't matter, sifting powdered sugar is actually important.
- This recipe makes two pans of rolls.

### INGREDIENTS

#### Dough

- 2 TBS tablespoons active dry yeast
- 1/2 cup milk, warmed but not boiling
- 4 cups all purpose flour
- 1/3 cup light brown sugar
- 1 tsp ground cinnamon
- 1/4 tsp ground ginger
- 1/4 tsp ground cloves
- 1 TBS salt
- 4 TBS butter softened
- 3 eggs
- 1 cup pumpkin puree
- 1/2 cup cream cheese

#### Filling

- 1 cup brown sugar
- 1/2 cup butter
- 2 TBS ground cinnamon
- 1/2 tsp orange zest

#### Icing

- 1/2 cup cream cheese
- 1 cup confectioner's sugar, sifted
- 3 TBS orange juice — measure this, trust me

### DIRECTIONS

1. Combine the yeast and the warm milk and let sit until foamy, about 5 minutes.
2. In the bowl of a stand mixer fitted with the dough hook combine the flour, sugar, spices and salt. Add in the eggs, pumpkin puree, and yeast mixture. Mix until just combined, then add the butter. Mix the dough until



well combined, then knead the dough for 5 minutes until smooth and elastic. The dough will stick to the bottom of the bowl, but resist the temptation to add more flour.

3. Transfer the dough to a clean, oiled bowl and cover with plastic wrap. Let the dough rise until doubled in volume, 1-½ hours at a warm room temperature.

4. When the dough is almost finished rising, prepare the filling by browning the butter in a skillet until it is golden and toasty. Let the butter cool slightly then combine it with the brown sugar, cinnamon and orange zest. Prepare two, 8 or 9-inch baking pans by buttering or oiling them generously.

5. After the dough has risen, transfer it to a well floured surface and pat the dough into a 12-inch square. Break up the cream cheese and gently spread it on top of the dough, being careful not to tear the dough. Fold the dough into thirds, starting from the bottom so the cream cheese is completely sealed inside of the dough. Then roll the dough into a roughly 16-inch by 20-inch rectangle with the long side facing you, dust off any excess flour with a pastry brush.

6. Sprinkle the filling evenly over the top. Starting from the bottom, gently roll the dough into a log. Use a serrated knife and use very, very gentle and even pressure to cut the log into generous 1-inch slices. Gently place the cut rolls into the prepared pans, cover and let rise until almost doubled in size, 1-1 ½ hours. TIP: If you'd like to freeze some rolls to bake off at a later date, now is a good time to do it. Wrap the pan in 2 layers of plastic wrap and a layer of foil and freeze. To bake, let the frozen rolls come to room temperature and complete their final rise before baking.

7. Twenty minutes before you are ready to bake the rolls preheat your oven to 350°. Bake the rolls until they are cooked through and lightly golden, 20-25 minutes. NOTE: If you're using a glass pan, adjust the oven to 325° and watch carefully, as glass transfers more heat and will take longer to cool down once out of the oven.

8. While they are baking, prepare the glaze by whisking the cream cheese, powdered sugar, orange juice, and a tiny pinch of salt together until smooth. It won't be smooth if you don't sift the sugar. I know, it's an extra step but worth it! Let the rolls cool for about 5 minutes before glazing and digging in. Be judicious with the glaze, a little goes a long way.

These were good, and can be even better. I'll try out the wisdom gained on batch #2, which is chilling in the freezer until a special occasion arises.

## Mom's Pumpkin Muffins

Fall brings out the pumpkin-lovers and pumpkin-haters. If I had my druthers, I'd mandate canned pumpkin as a year-round grocery store item. Until then, I'm hoarding.

We had company staying with us this weekend and I wanted to keep my hands busy. Sure, it was 92 degrees with 80% humidity, but I made pumpkin muffins anyway. I mean it IS technically fall, and there's nothing like baking bread to invoke sweetness in the kitchen. I cranked the A/C down, the oven up, and once again fell in love with my KitchenAid mixer.

This pumpkin muffin recipe is older than me, origins unknown. My mom made these throughout my childhood, so much so that my oldest friends recall them with smiles. I get requests to bring 'em to parties, and rarely encounter a newbie unmoved by their delightful flavor and texture. They're soft and moist, easy one-bowl baked beauties.

Which brings me to what makes these extra awesome: no dairy, no eggs, no oil, no butter. Dare I call them vegan-friendly? Healthy? You decide:

- 20 oz. canned pumpkin
- 2 1/2 cups all-purpose flour
- 2 cups sugar
- 1/2 cup applesauce (unsweetened is best)
- 1/2 cup raisins – I like golden raisins but regular work fine
- 1/2 cup pecans – optional I suppose, but I prefer to include 'em
- 2 tsp baking soda
- 1/2 tsp salt
- 1 tsp vanilla extract
- 2 tsp cinnamon
- 1 tsp cloves

Directions:

1. Preheat the oven to 400 degrees F.
2. Combine the wet stuff – pumpkin, sugar, applesauce, pecans, vanilla and raisins in a bowl. Stir to combine.
3. Add flour, baking soda, salt, cinnamon and cloves. Mix until dough is a consistent texture. It will be lumpy due to pecans and raisins, but the thickness should be even — i.e. no flour clumps.
4. Spray muffin pan or line with cups. Scoop batter into cups evenly, about 3 TBS each.
5. Bake for 18-20 minutes, or until tops are spongy and middles firm. Cool for 5 minutes before removing from pan.

YIELD: 18 muffins. Can be doubled for a crowd or for freezing. Serve plain, or topped with almond butter or margarine.

## The Lazy Man's Eggs: Frittata

I admit it; I can't make an omelet. But I love dressed up, flavorful, fluffy eggs full of color and vegetables. Enter the frittata. A frittata is an egg-based dish similar to an omelet or crustless quiche, with additional ingredients such as meats, cheeses, vegetables or pasta.

It looks complicated and impressive on the table, but is really super easy to prepare. I started with a basic recipe then played around a bit using what I had on hand. You can double it easily enough, depending on your crowd and skillet size. Check it:

### Ingredients

- 5 eggs + 1/2 cup egg whites (just 5 eggs is fine, too — the whites make it a bit puffier)
- 2-3 oz. goat cheese, crumbled
- 3-4 oz. baby spinach
- 1/2 tomato, sliced/diced
- 4-5 baby portobello mushrooms, sliced
- 1/4 onion or 1 clove garlic
- 1-2 TB vegetable oil
- 1 TB olive oil
- salt and pepper

### Process

1. Preheat oven to 400 F. Crack eggs in a bowl. Add salt and pepper and whisk to blend.
2. Heat oils in an oven-safe skillet. TIP: I used a cast iron skillet, so if you have a nonstick skillet you might use less oil. When oil is hot, add mushrooms and onion/garlic, sauteing until slightly tender. Add spinach and stir to wilt.
3. Pour in eggs, top with tomatoes and goat cheese. Allow to sit on the stove cooking for about 5 minutes.
4. Transfer pan to oven and cook for 10-12 minutes, or until springy to the touch. Allow to sit for a few minutes before serving.

I made another frittata the next day, using Parmesan and orange bell pepper. Delish! This is a good recipe to keep on hand for weekends and company. Oh, and don't forget to pair it with a Bloody Mary.



## Parfait, Donkey's Favorite Food

*"You know what ELSE everybody likes? Parfaits! Have you ever met a person, you say, "Let's get some parfait," they say, "Hell no, I don't like no parfait"? Parfait's gotta be the most delicious thing on the whole damn planet!" – Donkey from Shrek*

I get lazy about preparing food sometimes. Slice a bell pepper? Oh, the effort. Sauté meat in a pan? So.much.work. And then I have to do DISHES. ugh. This results in consuming a lot of salad, hummus and breakfast foods.

By 2pm today all I'd eaten was a banana, a pot of coffee, and some green juice (spinach, lemon juice, ginger, 2 green apples). Enter the deconstructed parfait.

Using what I had in the pantry, my attempt at eating protein today included:

- 6 oz vanilla, nonfat Greek yogurt
- 5 organic strawberries, rinsed and sliced (de-stemmed them over the sink- not dirtying a cutting board)
- 1/4 cup dried blueberries
- Mixed nuts, almonds, pecans

Yogurt goes on the bottom and everything else falls into place on top. If presentation points were on the line, I would have layered it twice in a martini glass. But for today's casual, still-in-pajamas feeling, a single bowl is best.

## Quiche Muffins for “Brinner”

No longer does brunch hold the prize for combo words of tasty reasons to eat eggs and drink spiked drinks. Courtesy of breakfast for dinner with some girlfriends last night, we hereby claim “brinner” as the new hip dining option. Along with indulging in strata, sweet potato hash, pumpkin bread with homemade apple butter and spiked hot cocoa, I contributed Quiche Muffins:

- 8 oz cream cheese, softened
- 5 teaspoons milk
- 2 eggs
- 1/2 cup cheese – I like sharp cheddar
- 3-4 chopped broccoli florets
- 1/3 chopped bell pepper
- 1 tsp minced garlic
- 1 tube (8 oz) refrigerated crescent rolls
- 3 cooked and crumbled bacon strips (optional)



Beat the cream cheese and milk until smooth. Add the eggs, cheese, broccoli, bell pepper and garlic. Mix well.

Separate the refrigerated dough into 8 triangles. Press the dough into the bottom and up the sides of greased muffin cups. If using meat, place some in the bottom of the cups.

Pour egg mixture into cups. Top with meat. Bake, uncovered, at 375 degrees F for 18-22 minutes or until a knife comes out clean. Serve warm.

Something that’s nice about this recipe is you can make it more or less healthful. I used reduced fat cream cheese, reduced fat cheddar, skim milk, and reduced fat crescent rolls. They still taste awesome with that creamy mouth feel, but there’s less guilt. And your guests will never know the difference!

Adapted from “Taste of Home Best Holiday Recipes 2007”

## Bacon + Peanut Butter Sandwich – aka Hangover Food

Creativity Breeds Simplicity – Bacon Edition

Bacon + PB = Goodness

This weekend, your guest blogger awoke to make breakfast for the (slightly cranky) author of this blog. Make your own inferences on that scenario. Not knowing exactly what the author had available at the time, my answer to the mumbled question “what’s for breakfast” was a resounding “I’ll be creative!”

Creativity around breakfast time (at least my breakfast making) usually involves some combination of eggs, meat, vegetables, and sometimes cheese to form a large pseudo-omelet. It always does the trick. However, this session in creative morning eats was foiled by the lack of eggs in the fridge. Alas, there was the one item that always makes anything better: bacon.

The bacon was promptly thrown into the pan on the stove and I figured the rest would take care of itself. I didn’t need to get cute here and just needed let the bacon do the talking in whatever I created. I broke out the bread, threw it in the toaster and began to ponder what to combine with the savory savior of meats.

Upon opening the cabinet for my first look, it immediately struck me that a sweet and savory combo of peanut butter and bacon was the right choice. I’m not breaking any new ground here, as I’ve seen this done before. But why hadn’t I done this before? Simple. Delicious. Filling: Bacon + Peanut Butter.

That’s it. That’s the recipe. Go make it and enjoy!

– courtesy of guest blogger Bryan



## Beverages & Booze

- Winter White Cosmopolitan
- Summer Sangria
- Birthday Cake Martini
- Homemade Chai Tea
- Peach Fizz = Simplified Bellini
- Six Best Light Beers
- Perfect Bloody Mary Bar

## Winter White Cosmopolitan

Thanks to Bonfish Grill, I have a new favorite holiday drink: winter white cosmopolitan. I tossed back two of these and could happily have finished an entire pitcher.

TIP: Don't skimp on the shaking and martini glass presentation – the icy chill makes this drink sparkle.

### Ingredients

- 2 oz. cranberry vodka
- 2 oz. white cranberry juice
- .75 oz Cointreau
- 1 oz. sweetened lime juice (mixture of lime juice and simple syrup)
- 3-4 raw cranberries, for garnish

Directions: Fill a cocktail shaker with ice. Add cranberry juice, vodka, Cointreau and lime juice. Shake to combine well. Strain into a chilled martini glass and top with 3-4 cranberries.

Verdict: Dangerously delicious



## Summer Sangria

Red wines are perfect for nippy nights during fall and winter, but come summer, they taste heavy and uncomfortable. Tannins when I'm sweating? Ugh. Solution: make sangria with that red instead!

There are near infinite combinations for this fruity concoction, but here's what I made last night:

- 1 bottle zinfandel or other red
- 1 orange, sliced
- 1 ripe or overripe nectarine, diced
- 1 apple, cored and diced
- 1/2 cup+ orange juice (or apple juice)
- 1/4 cup+ Triple Sec or Cointreau (triple sec being the cheaper cousin)
- Ice
- Seltzer water

Combine all the ingredients except ice and seltzer in a large bowl or pitcher. Refrigerate at least one hour to let flavors meld. Pour over and top with a floater of seltzer. Serves 4-6.

NOTE: Sample to check sweetness levels. I don't like a super sweet sangria, so the ripe fruit provides the sugar in this recipe. You may like a bit more dessert-like drink, in which case, pick up a sweeter red wine for the base, add sugar or use Asti champagne instead of seltzer water. Fiddling with the amount of orange juice can enliven the flavor too.



ice

## **Birthday Cake Martini**

### Ingredients:

- 2 ounces whipped vodka
- 1.5 ounces amaretto
- 1 ounce white chocolate liqueur
- 2 ounces half and half
- Honey and sprinkles for garnish

### Directions:

Begin with two shallow dishes or plates. To one, add a teaspoon of honey. To the other, add the sprinkles. Rim the edge of the martini glass first in the honey and then in the sprinkles. Set aside.

In a cocktail shaker filled with ice, combine the vodka, amaretto, white chocolate liqueur and half and half. Shake vigorously. Strain into your prepared martini glass.

## The Healing Power of Chai

It's official: we survived Hurricane Sandy! After sitting inside a one-bedroom apartment with my cat and significant other for something like 60 hours, I needed out. Laptop packed, raincoat donned, we trekked out for lunch and work to rejoin the land of the living.

Thanks to Dominion Power for keeping the lights on so that Busboys and Poets could make me a perfectly warm, frothy, cinnamon-y chai latte. Chai is my coffee alternative; it gives a light caffeine kick that's more mellow than coffee and certainly more comforting.

Tomorrow it's back to work, but today, perhaps I'll try my hand at making my own chai. I like this post by Crunchy Betty on the art of homemade chai:

### Crunchy Betty's Favorite Chai Recipe

Makes 8 cups of chai concentrate (or 16 mugs of concentrate mixed with the "milk" agent of your choice).

- 7 cinnamon sticks, broken into smallish pieces
- 8-10 cardamom pods (roasted and crushed/cracked)
- 10-13 whole cloves
- One healthy-sized piece of ginger root (approximately the length of a key or 2 to 2-1/2 inches), cut into small nickel-sized pieces
- 3/4 to 1 tsp black peppercorns
- 2 vanilla beans (slice down the middle and scrape the beans into the pot before adding the outer casing) \*\*(this ingredient is not necessary, and sometimes hard to find inexpensively, but I love it to pieces)
- 9 cups of cold water
- 1-1/2 Tablespoons fennel seed (or anise seed) (do not add until you've taken the pot off the heat)
- 3 Tablespoons black tea
- Honey or evaporated cane juice
- Milk product (milk, cream, soy milk, rice milk, or almond milk)



Throw all of the above into a large pot and add the water. Place your pot on the stove and crank up the heat until you get a nice, calm boil going. Pop on a lid and let it do its thing for 30 minutes (shorter for weaker tea, longer for stronger). Taste the chai a few times while you're brewing – just remember that you'll be adding the dark tea and fennel in a bit. But get a feel for what this particular batch of chai really needs. Feel free to add whatever you'd like as it strikes you. And feel free, when you lift off the lid, to sink to the floor in ecstasy when the delicious smell hits your nose.

After your boiling time has come to an end, take the pot off the burner and add the fennel seeds and black tea. Let this steep for 5 minutes (again, say it with me "shorter for weaker tea, longer for stronger").

You should have a nice heavy mix of spices and tea going on by this point, so get your muscles prepared for the only hard part. Strain your mix over a wire-mesh sieve or cheese cloth and into an appropriately-sized



container. Sometimes I will strain twice (wire mesh first, cheesecloth second) if my mixture seems to have more remnants than it should.

After you've cleared out all of the ingredients and are left with just the liquid, add your sweetener to taste. For a pot this size, I will use a quarter cup of honey and a half cup of evaporated cane juice, but I like my chai as sweet as I like it spicy. Dissolve this well.

Now fill your glass half full (or to the height of however chai-ey you want it) with the concentrate and fill the rest with your desired milk product. Stir. Inhale. Drink.

Thanks, Betty!

## Peach Fizz – Bellini Alternative

The alternative Bellini was created for my Mom.

Her favorite cocktail is a Bellini but the hassle and mess of blending frozen peaches into a puree sounded like too much work.

We created this fine concoction instead:

- 1 part peach schnapps
- 2 parts champagne
- A frozen peach slice

Viola! A Peach Fizz. Lovely and tasty and oh so simple – especially when the kitchen is overrun with pots and pans and people. Gonna keep this in mind for my next ladies brunch.



## Six Best Light Beers

It's summer, which means drinking a cold beer on a hot day is a slice of heaven. It also means it's swimsuit season so downing Leinenkugel's Berry Weiss at 207 calories a bottle is not in my waist's best interests. Thank god for retro rucking and tankinis!

Here are my top light beer picks for skirting the rules and filling Naglene bottles for relaxing at our alcohol-free pool. From worst to best, my top 6 picks:

**6. Michelob Ultra Cactus Lime (95 calories).** This is by far the crappiest beer I've ever imbibed. I don't know how much the samplers at Women's Health were paid to rank it #2 on their list, but this beer tastes like a combination of Pine-Sol and dishwasher.

Bottom line: Save your money unless you wanna vomit. Also, I'm giving away my leftover beers.

**5. Miller Genuine Draft 64 (64 calories).** In spite of their ads with happy, hip people, this beer doesn't entice my taste buds to utter a single whoop. Even when super-duper cold, it barely tastes like beer-flavored water combined with a drop of yellow food coloring.

Bottom line: Take a shot of bourbon, vodka or rum for the same number of calories.

**4. Corona Light (105 calories).** It's a universally acknowledged truth that Corona tastes best after yard work. A regular Corona has about 50 more calories, so this brew isn't going to whittle the waist, but it offers less guilt. Throw in the requisite lime wedge and fight scurvy too!

Bottom line: Tip it back after a good sweat.

**3. Coors Light (102 calories).** I'm kind of a sucker for the ice-cold blue mountains, but even without the hyper-color can, I really LIKE drinking Coors Light. Refreshing, fizzy, it's easy to drink with everything from sushi to burgers.

Bottom line: Buy a 24-pack for the weekend, 'cuz you're gonna drink 'em.

**2. Miller High Life Light (110 calories).** The first time I tried a Miller High Life beer followed a 4-day hike on the Appalachian Trail. I showered, bought a 6-pack of this beer at a gas station and sat on a porch in a tiny town in southern Virginia — rocking, sipping and reading. Good stuff. The bf just introduced me to the light version and my heart is happy to enjoy the champagne of beers more frequently. Best from a bottle.

Bottom line: Say yes and enjoy it.

**1. Yeungling Light (99 calories).** For me, Yeungling Light tastes identical to regular Yeungling. And with less than 100 calories for real beer flavor and color, this brew tops my list. It's full-bodied but not bitter, and it's filling like a real beer — none of that "oh, just drinking tinted water over here" feeling. I also like that it's not a guzzling beer, as say, Coors Light can easily become.

Bottom line: Cheers to real beer flavor that's summer-shorts friendly

Of course, opinions vary. Fitness gave Bud Light (110 calories) their top spot. Women's Health crowned Bud Select 55 (55 calories) as its winner. What about you? What light beer catches your fancy?

## Perfect Bloody Mary Bar

This morning the bf and I tried brunch at Capitol City Brewing Company in Shirlington. Their brunch is relatively new and could definitely use variety. The food was okay, but the best part involved a 3-for-1 deal on Mimosas and Bloody Mary's. In my perfect world, all Bloody Mary's are offered as part of a make-your-own Bloody Mary Bar.

Items to be included a perfect Bloody Mary Bar:

- Hot sauce – To each their own spice
- Celery – way more fun than a spoon as a stir stick
- Horseradish – duh
- Worcestershire – a touch of savory salty
- Old Bay- best when rimmed on the glass
- Limes or lemons – for squeezing and garnishing
- Pepper
- Celery salt – if you don't have it, you'll taste the lack
- Olives – Okay, this is not my vote but I understand it's integral for some
- Pickled mini corns, or any pickled vegetables really
- A1 sauce – oh so zingy

In DC, my pick for building your own perfect beverage at brunch is The Argonaut in NE. It's about \$9 for bottomless Mimosas or Bloody Mary's, and their brunch foods are flavorful even if the ambiance is a bit so-so.

Another possibility is sampling the selection of Best Blood Mary's as recommended by the [Bitches Who Brunch](#).

## **Carnivore Delights**

- **Angry Chicken (Arrabbiata)**
- **No Cook Main Meal: Chicken Caprese Salad**
- **Copycat Chick-Fil-A Honey Mustard Sauce – with Chicken**
- **Better-for-You Indian Butter Chicken**
- **Skinny Sloppy Joe's**
- **Chicken 'n Pineapple Coconut Curry**
- **Smoked Brisket**
- **Pork Shoulder with Homemade BBQ Sauce**
- **Chicken 'n Broccoli Stir Fry with Pineapple**
- **Crowd-pleasing Chicken Enchilada Casserole**
- **Cemita – Mexican Pork Sandwich**
- **Käsekraier – Pork sausage stuffed with cheese**

## Angry Chicken (Arrabbiata)

The word “arrabbiata” in Spanish means angry, and this sauce is meant to make your mouth burn. That was my goal at least, as I’ve been trying to kick a wicked sore throat for days and have a very unscientific theory that spicy foods will heal the hurt.

This sauce turned out GREAT, and earned happy sighs and compliments from my fiancé as well. It’s spicy but not overboard, easy but layered in flavor. I’m making this again with shrimp!

### Ingredients

- 2 TBS olive oil
- 6 boneless chicken thighs or 3 breasts
- Salt & pepper
- 1 TBS minced garlic
- 1/2 diced red onion
- 1 (24 oz.) marinara sauce
- 4 tomatoes, roughly chopped or 1 (15 oz) can diced tomatoes
- 1 tsp dried basil
- 1/2 tsp crushed red pepper (or more to taste)
- 3/4 cup chicken broth
- 1/2 tsp cayenne or chili powder
- 12 oz. pasta for serving
- Goat cheese (optional)

### Instructions

Season the chicken thighs with a pinch of salt, pepper and cayenne.

Heat the olive oil in a large skillet over medium heat. When the oil is hot, add the chicken. Brown the chicken on both sides (5-7 minutes each side), then remove the chicken from the skillet.

After the chicken is removed from the skillet, add the onion and minced garlic to the pan, loosening the browned bits. Sauté briefly until onion and garlic are soft.

Add marinara sauce, tomatoes with juices, basil, crushed red pepper, and chicken broth to the skillet. Stir to combine.

Return the chicken to the skillet with the sauce, and spoon some sauce over top of each piece. Allow the sauce to come to a simmer. Taste it and adjust the heat and salt. Simmer the chicken in the sauce for 30 minutes, turning the chicken over half way through to make sure both sides receive adequate heat and sauce.

Serve the chicken and sauce over cooked pasta. Top with goat cheese.

Adapted from Budget Bytes.

P.S. Don’t serve this over brown rice pasta. They’re lying. It’s not the same as normal pasta and you will be disappointed.

## No Cook Main Meal: Chicken Caprese Salad

It's summer. They tell me we'll hit 100 here in Austin for the next 3 months. For the sake of our electric bill and my sanity, I'm hunting for low-to-no cook dinners. I found this lil' beauty on The Skinny Chick Can Bake, and made a few changes.

You'll spend time on the prep side with chopping and dicing, so pour a glass of wine and carry on.

- 2 pounds fresh tomatoes, chopped (or halved grape/ cherry tomatoes )
- 12 – 16 oz. fresh mozzarella, cubed
- 1.5 cups diced celery – this sounds odd but it's necessary for the crunch and color
- 1 cucumber, peeled, seeded and cubed
- 1 cup sliced basil (or combo of dried, paste and nearly-dead leaves from your patio plant)
- 2 tsp minced garlic
- 1/4 cup+ balsamic vinegar
- Salt to taste (like guacamole, don't under-salt)
- Black pepper to taste
- 1/3 cup extra virgin olive oil
- 2 cups diced, cooked chicken (optional)

### Instructions:

1. Chop tomatoes, mozzarella, celery, cucumber and basil. Combine them one bowl. If adding chicken, put it in too.
2. In a smaller bowl, combine garlic, vinegar, salt, pepper and olive oil. Whisk together and pour over vegetables and chicken. Toss gently.
3. Eat! We ate it straight up with forks, but pita pockets or naan would also work well. I might add avocado or chilled pasta next time. Taste and see what you think. A pinch of sugar?



## **Copycat Chick-Fil-A Honey Mustard Sauce (with Chicken)**

Though the source recipe is focused on the chicken, the best takeaway on this dish was the sauce. Seriously, it was amazing. My first bite took me back to a Superbowl party with a Chick-Fil-A chicken tray. I kept the sauce leftovers and poured it over salad the next day.

- 4 boneless, skinless chicken breasts
- 2 tablespoons olive oil
- 1/4 cup honey
- 1/4 cup dijon mustard
- 4 tablespoons spicy mustard – I used brown
- salt & pepper

1. Heat a skillet on medium high heat and add olive oil. Pat and press chicken with paper towels so it is very, very dry. Season with salt and pepper generously. Add chicken to skillet and brown on both sides, about 6-8 minutes each, depending on the thickness.

2. In a bowl, combine honey and both mustards. Whisk well. Taste, adjust to heat/sweet preferences.

3. Remove chicken and while it is still hot, brush on mustard. Serve!

## Better-for-you Butter Chicken

According to my fiance, this should be called “Righteous butter chicken.”

I love butter chicken and order it every chance I have. Officially known as ‘murgh makhani’ and described as ‘Indian chicken in tomato cream sauce,’ I’m rarely disappointed. This is baby Indian food — almost zero heat, sweet and hard to resist seconds, or thirds.

However, generally I place it in the category of ‘foods best made by others’ since the amount of cream sends my stomach racing into hiding. To avoid lactose overload, I gave this version from Natural Noshing a try. It’s light on dairy but still full on flavor, and can easily be made lactose free. Overall assessment: it’s good. It’s not EPIC or a copycat recipe but it’s solid.

Next time I’ll use vegetable or peanut oil, though. I apparently don’t like the scent of heated coconut oil; it reminds me of being stuck in a car on a hot day with a box of melting crayons and a coloring book. Also, lemon juice is an absolute must for finishing the dish. I’ve made the changes that I will make next time to the recipe below.

TIP: This will take you about 2 hours, start to finish.

- Ingredients for the Chicken:
- 4 skinless, boneless chicken breasts
- 2 cups yogurt (can use dairy-free options)
- 2 TBS ginger-garlic paste
- 1 tsp salt or to taste
- 1 tsp cumin powder
- 1 tsp garam masala
- 1 tsp cayenne pepper
- 3 tsp tandoori masala powder
- 2 tsp kasuri methi or 1 tsp ground dried fenugreek seeds
- 4 TBS canola oil, coconut oil or other neutral oil

Directions For the Chicken:

1. In a small bowl mix together cumin, garam masala, salt, cayenne pepper, tandoori masala and fenugreek/kasuri methi. Rub on both sides of the chicken and refrigerate for at least 30-60 minutes.
2. Line a pan with parchment or foil. In a large bowl, whisk together yogurt, oil and ginger garlic paste. Dip each chicken breast into the yogurt mixture. Coat well. Lay on prepared pan.
3. Heat oven to broil and cook 10-18 minutes or until cooked through (depending on thickness of chicken), flipping them over halfway through. For 4 meaty breasts, I cooked 15-20 minutes on each side. When cooked through, let chicken rest for 5 minutes. Optional: slice chicken into 1 inch cubes.

Ingredients for the Butter Sauce:

- 4 TBS coconut oil, canola oil or other neutral oil
- 2 medium onions, thinly sliced
- 3 TBS ginger-garlic paste

- 4 cups diced tomatoes (use canned or marinara to save time)
- 2 TBS flour
- 1 tsp cayenne pepper
- 2 tsp cumin powder
- 2 tsp garam masala
- 3 TBS kasuri methi or 1 tsp dried ground fenugreek seeds
- 1/2 tsp sea salt
- 1 TBS sugar or sweetener of choice
- 1/2 cup coconut milk OR greek yogurt OR sour cream
- 4 TBS butter, ghee, or margarine
- Juice of 1 lemon

#### Directions For the Butter Sauce:

1. Heat the oil in a medium sauté pan. Cook onions until soft and translucent. Add ginger-garlic paste and stir for about 1 minute.
2. Add tomatoes, flour, cayenne, cumin, garam masala, kasuri methi, salt and sugar. Cook on medium heat until thick. Optional: Puree sauce in a blender and return to the pan. Personally I find blending hot liquids in batches a messy business.
3. Add dairy (yogurt/coconut milk/sour cream) and butter. Stir and cook for another 5 minutes. Add lemon juice. Taste and adjust. If you prefer a thinner sauce, add a bit more coconut milk.
4. If you opted to cut up the chicken, add it to the pan and simmer for a few more minutes. I sliced up the chicken and poured sauce over it instead.

Serve hot with lentils, rice and buttery garlic naan. Sigh contentedly and enter righteous butter chicken food coma.

## Skinny Sloppy Joe's

I'm craving big, bold flavors right now. No mansy-pansy olive oil and parsley for this chicka. I stumbled on this recipe for Hungry Girl Broccoli Slaw and saw an opportunity. Veggies + ground turkey + BBQ sauce = a sloppy joe!

### Ingredients

- 12-oz. bag (4 cups) dry, prechopped coleslaw, broccoli slaw if you can find it
- 1 pound ground turkey
- 8 oz marinara sauce, pizza sauce or tomato sauce
- Bottle of favorite BBQ sauce – I used Weber Molasses Sauce
- 1/2 cup vinegar – I used a combo of rice and balsamic
- 1/2 cup chicken broth
- 2 tsp. onion powder
- salt and pepper to taste
- buns for serving

### Instructions:

1. Combine chicken broth and bag of coleslaw in a large pot. Set over low-medium heat for 5-8 minutes, stirring occasionally, until cabbage begins to soften. Don't wilt it; you want some crunch left.
2. While the coleslaw softens, cook the ground turkey in a skillet with salt and pepper.
3. Add the marinara sauce, onion powder, 1/2 the bottle of BBQ sauce and 1/4 cup of vinegar to the coleslaw mix. Stir, and let simmer 5-10 minutes to blend the flavors. Taste and adjust. TIP: I used a lot of vinegar since the sauce was so sweet, but this will vary based on your preferences. Add remaining tomato sauce and BBQ sauce to taste.
4. Add the cooked, ground turkey to the BBQ coleslaw pot. Stir to combine. Simmer another 10 minutes. Taste and adjust.
5. Spoon the mixture onto your bun and nosh! Keep the paper towels handy, and don't eat this while wearing a white shirt.

I liked how easy this was, and how the half-meat, half-veggie filling offered a way to get more greens in the diet. Even my meat-lover bf thought they were a hit, eating 3 skinny joe's to prove it! Oh, and this paired well with Yeungling Light beer.

## Chicken 'n Pineapple Coconut Curry

I have a thing for Thai and Indian food flavors – I love the (medium) heat, the complexity of the spices, the warmth and comfort. Yet in spite of owning 5 cookbooks on the methods, I just haven't yet duplicated any restaurant quality recipes at home.

This one comes close.

Originally created by my big sister as a crockpot dish, I ran out of time and decided to wing it and make it in the oven. Below is the recipe I'll use next time, with adjustments included as I went along.

### Ingredients

- 6-8 Chicken tenderloins
- 1 can coconut milk – not the light stuff, people
- 1 can pineapple chunks
- 1 small can tomato paste (do they even make large cans?)
- 1 large green or red bell pepper, chopped
- 3 TBS curry powder
- 1 TB minced garlic
- 4 TBS chopped fresh basil, divided
- Juice of ½ lemon
- 2 TBS olive oil
- 1 TBS salt – for real, it needs it
- pepper
- prepared Rice (optional)
- baby spinach (optional)

### Directions

1. Preheat oven to 375 degrees F. Place olive oil and chickens in a baking dish.
2. Using an immersion blender or other device, blend together coconut milk, juice from pineapple can, ½ of the pineapple chunks, tomato paste, ½ of the chopped bell pepper, curry powder, garlic, salt and pepper. The sauce is a festive orange and feels slightly thick.
3. Pour the pureed mixture over the chicken, flipping the chicken to coat it. Bake uncovered for 35 minutes.
4. Remove from oven. Stir in remaining pineapple chunks, remaining chopped bell pepper and 3 TBS basil. Cook another 10 minutes or until chicken is cooked and sauce bubbles around the edges of the pan.
5. Remove pan from the oven. Squeeze lemon juice and top with basil. Serve over rice and baby spinach.

To make it in a crock pot, place oil, chicken and blended sauce in a crock pot on low for 6 hours. The final 15 minutes or so, complete step 4 — just long enough to warm everything up.

I enjoyed this dish, though it was a tad bitter for my tastes. What would you recommend to make it even better? Sugar? Butter? Flaked coconut?

## Secondhand Smoke – Smoked Brisket

### Guest Post – Smoked Brisket

Earlier this summer, I procured a smoker from a friend for the very reasonable price of \$30. It was older and well-loved, but still in decent shape. My friend was trying to sell it on Craig's List but I was willing to take it off his hands after tasting some of his smoked meats. I had no prior experience with smoking but I was quite eager to step into the game. Throughout the summer I've used it three times: first with beef brisket, then pork ribs, then brisket again. I chose brisket again because of the success on the first go-round and the fact I knew it would be a crowd pleaser. (We'll ignore the ribs for now; still got some tinkering to do there.)

I researched what type of rub to lather on the delicious cut of meat. There seems to be quite a variety so I won't lie to you and pretend I looked extensively; I just randomly picked one of the first recipes I came across. Hats off to Bobby Flay's Oklahoma Joe recipe, which served as the basis for my first rub. Of course I didn't have all the spices on hand, so I made some alterations. Here is how the rub actually shook out:

- 1/4 cup kosher salt
- 1/4 cup sugar
- 2 tablespoons garlic powder
- 2 tablespoons dry mustard
- 2 tablespoons Spanish paprika
- 2 tablespoons chili powder
- 1 tablespoon celery salt
- 1 tablespoon lemon pepper
- 1 tablespoon freshly ground black pepper
- 1 teaspoon cayenne pepper

To note: I didn't have onion powder so I replaced it with dry mustard. Are these things similar? Well, no, not really. However, I learned through my previous tasting experiences that mustard in BBQ freaking rocks. I also didn't have white pepper because who the hell keeps white pepper around?

I gave the cut of brisket a good smothering, wrapped it in plastic wrap and placed it in the refrigerator for a few hours. Once I got the coals going, I took out the brisket to let it sit at room temperature for about half an hour. I used hickory wood chips as recommended.

The most difficult thing in smoking is regulating the temperature. It flared up a little too hot at times and in my overzealous tempering, it got a little too cool. I was lacking a meat thermometer and the "thermometer" on the smoker only lists "warm, ideal, and hot." I've now learned that you want to stay on the low-end of ideal, closer to warm (at least for the brisket – don't quote me on other meats yet). As the recipe states, I kept the brisket moist with apple juice throughout the process. It says use a spray bottle, but a turkey baster is a perfect alternative.

With smoking, the size of the cut of meat is going to heavily play into the time it takes to cook. The recipe calls for around 6 hours of smoking for a 5 to 8 pound cut of brisket. You could probably find that size at a butcher but if you are just heading to the meat aisle at your local grocery store, you're more likely to find a smaller cut – more on the order of 3 pounds. It took around 3 hours for the approximately 3 pound cut I purchased.

Since I'm a sandwich hound, and have written about my concoctions here and here on this blog before, I should note that I did enjoy a brisket sandwich. I used a medium-sized sub (or a hoagie roll would suffice), and the kicker for me was also smoking some jalapeños and some Gouda cheese to finish off the sandwich.

Everything went over well with the guests and I highly recommend this rub. I still have awhile to go to perfect my smoking skills, but not bad for my first foray. Meanwhile, the house still smells like a campfire...

– posted by Bryan

## **Balsamic Honey Pulled Pork Sliders with Homemade BBQ sauce**

“Nom...yum...sooo...nummy. mmmm...”

This was the extent of my words when we tried this recipe for Balsamic Honey Pulled Pork Sliders . Yes, the pork was tasty and the Hawaiian rolls and coleslaw were excellent additions. But the true star was the tart, sweet, tangy homemade sauce.

For the sauce:

- 1 cup balsamic vinegar
- 3/4 cup ketchup
- 1 can tomato paste
- 1/3 cup packed brown sugar
- 1/4 cup honey
- 1 Tablespoon Worcestershire sauce
- 1 Tablespoon Dijon-style mustard
- 2 garlic cloves, minced
- 1/2 teaspoons cracked black pepper
- 1/4 teaspoon salt
- Pinch of red pepper flakes

The chef – which was not me, to be truthful – doubled the sauce for our 7 pounds of pork shoulder in the crock pot. He cooked it separately from the crock pot in a saucepan for about 20 minutes until it thickened, then poured over the shredded pork. It was shared among friends on a cold fall night, served with an appetizer of grilled cheese and hummus. My personal favorite combo of cheese: queso fresco and a local tomme raw milk cheese.

p.s. I recommend Shout Stick for getting this lip-smacking sauce out of your clothes.

Sauce adapted from [Pretty.Good. Food.](#)



## **Chicken, broccoli and pineapple stir-fry = Hankering for Brown Sauce**

You know, brown sauce. The yummy goodness that broccoli beef comes slathered in at Chinese restaurants. The stuff you pour over flavorless, dry white rice and it instantly makes your tastebuds sigh in happiness. But how do feed the craving while the wind howls outside during a tropical storm warning?

Solution: you make it!

My cooking style is less Julia and more Contessa: find out the basic ingredients then add varying amounts to get the best result. (Hint: this doesn't work as well in frosting. See strawberry cake ooze for details). I didn't have any broth, or bouillion or stock, nor cornstarch. But by golly, it came out the perfect level of salty goodness I needed. I served it with a chicken, broccoli and pineapple stir-fry.

### **Basic Brown Sauce**

- 3 cloves garlic
- 4 TBS brown sugar
- 3 TBS oyster sauce
- 3 TBS soy sauce
- 1 tsp flour
- 1 TBS oil (olive or corn)

Whisk all ingredients together, except the oil. Heat a pan and add the oil. Pour ingredients in and let it boil. Add water as needed for desired consistency. Either pour over ingredients or add ingredient to pan and cook with sauce.

## Crowd-pleasing Enchilada Casserole

I hosted a group dinner last Sunday, and wanted something that would feed a crowd without breaking the bank or my back. Frittata, lasagna, breakfast for dinner — all were considered and discarded. The ease and delicious comfort of Mexican food came to mind and viola! Chicken Enchilada Casserole was born. I adapted this recipe from my favorite easy chef, Aviva Goldfarb, and her Six O’Clock Scramble cookbook.

Results? Total hit. Between 6 adults we finished the entire pan. Yes, we were also drinking and quite hungry. It sat for 90 minutes before we ate it and was still warm when it came time to serve – a plus in my hostessing simplicity book. You could easily make this vegetarian or pescatarian; I’d add a layer of black or pinto beans next time too.

### Ingredients:

- 2 cans cream of chicken soup
- 8 oz. reduced fat sour cream
- 8 oz. canned green chiles (or 1 cup salsa verde)
- 2 cups cheddar cheese
- 4 oz. queso fresco, divided
- 1 bunch scallions, chopped
- 1.5 -2 cups cooked chicken (I used precooked southwest strips)
- 18 small corn tortillas
- 2 TBS cumin
- 1 TBS lime juice
- 1 tsp chile powder

Heat oven to 350 degrees. Spray a 9×13 pan with nonstick spray. In a medium bowl, combine soup, sour cream, chiles, cumin, lime juice and chile powder. In a separate bowl, combine the cheddar, 2 oz queso fresco, scallions and chicken. Feel free to up the spice level with jalapenos, salsa, vinegar or your other favorite flavors.

Spread about 1/4 cup of the soup mix in the bottom of the pan. Layer 6 corn tortillas, overlapping slightly. Top tortillas with 1/3 of chicken mixture. Continue layering soup mixture, tortillas, chicken mixture, soup, tortillas and chicken, ending with soup mixture. Unlike lasagna layers, everything doesn’t need to be covered and wet. There’ll be some dry tortillas and uncovered chicken – this is totally fine. Sprinkle remaining queso fresco and a shake of cumin and chile powder.

Bake uncovered for 30 minutes or until bubbly around the edges. Allow it to cool and firm up a bit, then cut and serve with salsa, avocado and black beans, sour cream, scallions — whatever pleases your palate.

## Sandwich Spotlight: Cemita

Well it appears my skills are good enough that a running segment on sandwiches is warranted (#humblebrag). While wasting a little time on the internet at work last week, I came across a [Top 10 sandwiches in the world list](#).

At first I was skeptical but then I got a look at some of these beauties and they looked slap-your-mother good. The one that really caught my eye (or appetite) was the **cemita**.

This is a Mexican sandwich hailing from the city of Puebla. There seem to be several takes on this (and several meats used) but I decided I wanted to make the most authentic version possible. Actually the best “recipe” I found was a video from *Diners, Drive-in’s and Dives* when [Guy visited a restaurant named Cemitas Puebla in Chicago](#). The owners are obviously native Poblanos.

Since I went with a video/secret recipe, there are no measurements for this recipe but I can give you estimates for what I used.

### Ingredients:

- Boneless pork chops (tenderized and flattened out)
- White onion
- 3 garlic cloves
- Cloves
- Black pepper
- Salt
- Milk
- Bread crumbs
- Avocado
- Queso Qaxaca (basically queso fresco so you can use that too)
- Chipotle peppers in Adobo sauce (canned)
- Kaiser or sesame rolls

### Directions:

Combine about a 1/4 of the white onion (chopped), 3 garlic cloves, and dash of cloves, a TBS or so of black pepper (I’d say a little more), dash of salt, a about 2 cups of milk, and a cup of bread crumbs. Blend these ingredients and place the tenderized pork chops in the mixture to marinate for 20-30 minutes.

Once marinated, heat some olive oil in a skillet or cast-iron pan. Cover the marinated pork chops in bread crumbs and fry 4-5 minutes until cooked through (depends on thickness). While the pork chops are cooking, lightly toast the rolls. Then, top the bottom half of the roll with some mashed avocado and chipotle peppers in adobo sauce (be light with these if you can’t handle spicy).



Once the pork chops are cooked place on top of the avocado and peppers, then top with some thin shavings of the Queso Oaxaca. This is supposed to be then topped with leaves of Papalo, which is a spice I just couldn't find. This prevented it from being completely authentic but certainly didn't stop it from being delicious. I highly recommend this sandwich and playing around with your own take on it. Enjoy!

– Guest post by Bryan

## Käsekrainer – Pork sausage stuffed with cheese

Greetings from Vienna, Austria! Many food adventures are underway, but the latest and greatest was today's käsekrainer.

A what? A käsekrainer. It's a smoked sausage made of pork with about 10 to 20% cheese (like Emmentaler) melted in the center. They're a local street food, and according to my hosts, very popular. They were invented in Austria at the beginning of the 1980's and are among the standard offer of hot dog stands here. It's about 3 hands long (As I read this, I'm giggling.)



I attempted to purchase my 3 euro sandwich with a 50 euro note, to which the vendor scoffed and told me to find something smaller. I said she could hold it and I'd be right back. This was not agreeable; she didn't want to hold my sandwich; she wanted to help the next customer in line. Ah, the joys of new cultures.

Cheeks flaming and feeling like a thief, I carried my bread-encased lunch across the street to a chocolate shop and loaded up on sweets to get change. (You're welcome, family!) How does one dig out money while holding a giant sausage? I asked/thrust the meat into the cashier's hand and smiled weakly.

Sidenote: why do European countries insist on 18 types of coins? What's wrong with a few coins and mostly bills? I paid for an espresso and tip with nothing but 2 piles of coins today, thankful to lose some of the clanking weight.

I returned to the street vendor and triumphantly handed her a 10 euro note, and then slunk off around the corner to chow down. It's damn good stuff, people! Salty, juicy and plump, shoved in a hard roll with ketchup and mustard. The cheese oozes out with each bite but isn't drippy. I ate all the meat and only tossed a bit of the ketchup-mustard flooded bread.

The only down side is that I've been burping käsekrainer for going on 4 hours now, so maybe a Tums is in order.

## Desserts

- **Luxurious Trés Leches Cake**
- **Pumpkin Ale Cupcakes with Maple Frosting and Candied Bacon**
- **Impress-Your-Guests Chocolate Bundt Cake**
- **Oatmeal Creme Pies**
- **\$1.33 Holiday Brownies**
- **Pumpkin Chocolate Chip Cookies**
- **Triple Layer Mint Oreo Brownies**
- **Crustless Coconut Custard Pie**
- **Lemon Puff Pastry**
- **Fudge of Legends**
- **The BEST Banana Pudding**
- **Chocolate Chip Cookie Bars**
- **Economical Peach Cobbler**

## Luxurious Tres Leches Cake

It's August in Austin, Texas, so it's hot, hot hot. Late afternoons mean prickly, dry skin and the desire to chug gallons of water while lying nearly naked and immobile on the couch.

Our freezer is stocked with frozen yogurt and Bomb Pops, but sometimes I just want a cold treat that's a little different — still cool, but soft.

The origins of this sweet confection are mysterious, but according to the Austin Chronicle, the standard dessert consists of:

*“A vanilla-flavored sponge cake drenched with a mixture of evaporated milk, sweetened condensed milk, and cream, and then frosted with whipped cream or meringue.”*

The flavors are rich, caramel-y and luxurious. It's sweet, oh my yes, but that just makes it all the better for pairing with iced coffee or unsweetened iced tea. The cake absorbs the fluids so it feels like biting into a juicy slice of cool watermelon.

The recipe has multiple steps, and total time is about 2 hours, but 2/3 of that is cake resting time. I made this on a weekday after work. My husband took a piece and devoured it with a note of awe: “I didn't mean to eat it that fast. I just couldn't stop.”



### Cake

- 1 box yellow cake mix
- 1/2 cup sour cream – I used light sour cream
- 1 – 3.4 oz box pudding mix – I used coconut cream flavor as it adds coconut flakes to the cake, but vanilla or cheesecake would work too)
- 2 eggs plus one egg yolk
- 1/2 cup vegetable oil
- 1 cup milk – I used unsweetened Silk

### Milk Glaze

- 14 oz can sweetened condensed milk
- 12 oz can evaporated milk
- 1 cup milk – I used 2%, but anything from skim to half-and-half works

### Whipped Topping

- 1 cup whipping cream/heavy cream
- 1/2 tsp vanilla extract

- 2 TBS granulated or powdered sugar

#### Directions

1. Preheat oven to 325 degrees F. Spray a 9 x 13 pan, preferably glass.
2. In a stand mixer or with a hand beater, mix all 6 cake ingredients for 2-3 minutes, or until light and fluffy. The batter will be thick because of the pudding.
3. Bake at 325 degrees for about 30 minutes or until toothpick comes out clean and cake top springs back at the touch. Let cool completely – or mostly. I don't do well with waiting.
4. Use a fork to poke holes in the top of the cake. Whisk the 3 milk glaze ingredients together and pour over the top of the cake. Cover with plastic wrap and refrigerate at least 30 minutes.
5. Combine the 3 topping ingredients and whip with an immersion blender or hand mixer until soft peaks form. You can double the ingredients for a thicker topping, but I only had about a cup of cream and it worked out beautifully. Spread topping evenly on the cake.
6. Cover with plastic wrap and refrigerate 30 minutes or overnight. Overnight is probably better, but who has time for that? Use a sharp knife to cut and a spatula to lift out your piece of dripping golden goodness.

The sheet cake is luscious but plain. Next time I might go for a prettier version – two 8" cake round layers. Then again, it's so soft that perhaps all Texans already know that the sheet cake is structurally superior. Sounds like a good summer experiment to me.

When did you first try tré s leches cake?

Recipe adapted from Tips from a Typical Mom.



## **Pumpkin ale cupcake with maple frosting and candied bacon – from Justin Gelito**

Rather than a wedding cake, we asked several friends to bake a dozen cupcakes for our reception. I cannot express how awesome they were! We had almond, hostess cakes, mocha, pumpkin chai, chocolate, sprinkles, maple, mini pies, marshmallow and more flavors than I can recall. It was amazing. And delicious! I promise to post pictures when they come in.

In the meantime, here's the first recipe I collected, from our friend Justin. He kicked butt with the texture and flavor combination, having perfected the treats through trial and error. I present Pumpkin Ale Cupcakes with Maple Frosting and Candied Bacon:

### **Ingredients:**

- 2 cups cake flour
- 1/2 tsp baking soda
- 1 tsp baking powder
- 1 tsp salt
- 1 TB pumpkin pie spice
- 1 cup pumpkin puree
- 6 oz pumpkin ale
- 6 TBS butter slightly cooler than room temp. firm but yields to a finger.
- 4 eggs separated
- 1/3 cup granulated sugar
- 1/2 cup granulated sugar
- 1/2 tsp cream of tarter

### **Frosting:**

- 6oz cream cheese, at room temperature
- 2.5 cups confectioners sugar, sifted
- 4 TBS butter, at room temp
- 3 TBS maple syrup

### **Candied Bacon:**

- 4 strips of thick cut bacon (+2 more for bacon snacking while waiting for cupcake to bake)
- 3 TBS maple syrup
- 1/8 cup granulated sugar

### *Candied Bacon Instructions*

Place bacon in a foil lined baking sheet and place in a cold oven. Set oven for 375F. Bake to desired level of crispness, 15-30 minutes. Set on paper towels to drain grease. While Bacon is cooling, heat maple syrup and sugar in a sauce pan over Medium/Medium Low heat. Heat to hard crack stage- syrup is dark and foamy,(300F with a candy thermometer, A spoon dipped in the syrup then plunged into ice water will form a hard candy shell). Use tongs and grab a slice of bacon and use a painting motion to get a candy glaze on each bacon strip. Cool candied bacon on parchment paper to avoid stuck bacon. chop into desired sized pieces for cupcake topping.

### *Frosting Instructions*

Whip the butter and cream cheese until fluffy (5-10 minutes with paddle attachment on stand mixer on max). Add maple syrup and mix until incorporated. Add confectioner's sugar and mix, slowly at first then on high, until frosting is light and fluffy. Frosting can be refrigerated until needed, just mix it up when applying.

Cupcake Instructions: Preheat Oven to 340F

### *Dry Ingredients*

Sift Cake flour with baking soda, baking powder, salt, pumpkin pie spice in a mixing bowl.

### *Wet Ingredients*

Cream butter and 1/2 cup sugar until light and fluffy (about 10 minutes on max setting on my stand mixer, with the paddle attachment). While mixer is on, add egg yolks one at a time waiting for each yolk to be fully incorporated before adding next yolk. Batter should have thick ribbony texture. Mix pumpkin puree with pumpkin ale. Add beer/pumpkin mixture to batter while mixer is on. Batter will curdle. Don't worry. Add cream of tarter to egg whites and whip until cream of tartar is incorporated and the egg whites have big bubbles( i used a hand mixer for the whipped egg whites). Add 1/3 cup of sugar to egg whites and whip until egg whites are at stiff peak stage.

### *Batter*

Add dry ingredients to wet batter in thirds. Fold mixture until just barely incorporated. Add whipped egg whites to batter in thirds. Fold mixture until egg whites are barely incorporated.

### *Bake*

Fill cupcake liners 2/3rd of the way full. Use a toothpick to do a quick stir of each cupcake to settle the bigger bubbles. Bake for 15-25 minutes until internal temp reaches ~200-210F or cake tester/toothpick comes out clean after inserted.

Cool. Frost cupcakes and sprinkle candied bacon on top.

### *Notes:*

Makes 15-18 cupcakes. I think. I was never consistent enough on spooning in the batter to the liners that i can tell you how accurate this is. If you're scaling the recipe, cream of tarter is 1/8 teaspoon per egg. Recommend doing candied bacon and frosting first before mixing the batter. I used smuttynose pumpkin beer for the cupcakes.

This was the basis of my recipe,

<http://www.generationyfoodie.com/2011/11/pumpkin-ale-cupcakes-with-maple-bacon.html>, but the cupcakes were too thick and verged too close to the muffin realm, the frosting was too thick and not maple enough, and the bacon was barely candied.

## Impress-Your-Guests Chocolate Bundt Cake

This easy breezy chocolate cake is a total hit. Every time. Everywhere. With everyone.

I first sampled this delectable happiness when a friend made it for bookclub. She, in turn, says, "I got the recipe from my Aunt. She makes it for special occasions. It is probably a cake doctor recipe from 10 years ago. It's always a hit with chocolate fans!"

### Ingredients

- Devil's food cake mix (make sure it does not already have pudding in the mix)
- 5.9 oz pkg chocolate pudding (if you can only find the 3.9 oz, that's fine, just reduce the bake time 5 minutes)
- 4 eggs
- 1/2 cup vegetable oil
- 1 cup regular or light sour cream
- 12 oz semi-sweet mini morsel chocolate chips (you can use regular chips but the minis distribute a bit more evenly)

### Directions

Mix the first five ingredients together. Stir in the chips and mix another minute or so. Pour batter into a greased bundt pan. Bake at 350 degrees for 50-60 minutes. Cool at least 15 minutes in the pan before inverting and removing the cake from the pan. Sprinkle with powdered sugar if desired. Ooh and ahh.

Saying the word "bundt" brings to mind this vignette from "My Big Fat Greek Wedding":

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WPvO53JHnmY>

## Homemade Oatmeal Creme Pies (Take 1)

I've decided – for no particular reason – that 2014 is the year of making oatmeal creme pies. I started with this recipe from Cooking Classy, and made a few minor tweaks as a newbie to this realm of cookie sandwiches. I don't know how they managed to make these in 25 minutes, as it took me 2 hours, but the end result is pretty impressive. And by that I mean that the creme filling made unicorns cry tears of joy. I will never make another frosting again.

In the words of the Birthday Boy & Official Taste-tester, "Seriously, it is so damn good. You nailed it, hun."

### Ingredients

- 1 3/4 cups + 2 Tbsp all-purpose flour
- 1 cup quick oats
- 3 tsp cocoa powder
- 1 1/2 tsp cornstarch
- 1 tsp baking powder
- 1/2 tsp baking soda
- 3/4 tsp salt
- 1 tsp cinnamon
- 1/4 tsp ground nutmeg
- 1/4 tsp ground ginger
- 1/2 cup butter, softened
- 1/2 cup shortening (unflavored)
- 1 1/4 cups granulated sugar
- 3 TBS molasses
- 2 large eggs (or egg product)
- 1 tsp vanilla extract
- 1/8 tsp almond extract

### Marshmallow Buttercream Filling

- 1/2 cup butter, nearly at room temperature
- 1/4 cup shortening (unflavored)
- 1 1/2 cups powdered sugar
- 7 oz. marshmallow creme

### Directions

1. Preheat oven to 350 degrees. In a mixing bowl, whisk together flour, oats, cocoa powder, cornstarch, baking powder, baking soda, salt, cinnamon, nutmeg and ginger, set aside. In the bowl of an electric stand mixer, whip together butter, shortening, sugar and molasses on medium-high speed until pale and fluffy, about 2 minutes. Stir in eggs, mixing until combine after each addition. Mix in vanilla and almond extract. Slowly add in dry ingredients and mix until well combined.

2. Scoop dough out about 2 Tbsp at a time and drop on cookie sheet lined with a Silpat or parchment paper. Depending on size, you can fit 6-9 per sheet. Bake in preheated oven 10 – 12 minutes. Cookies should still be

soft, not fully set – don't over bake. My oven runs hot so I pulled them out at 9 minutes, since 11 minutes made a batch of crunchy granola bars.

3. Allow to cool several minutes on baking sheet before transferring to wire rack to cool. Cool completely then spread marshmallow buttercream filling along bottom side of one cookie and sandwich to the bottom side of another cookie. Store cookies in an airtight container at room temperature.

4. To make the marshmallow buttercream filling:

In the bowl of an electric stand mixer or hand mixer (not an immersion blender, folks), whip butter and shortening on medium-high speed, until pale and fluffy, about 3 – 4 minutes. Add powdered sugar and blend on low-speed until combined, then increase speed to medium-high and whip for 1 minutes. Mix in marshmallow creme and taste. Try not to keel over in drooling bliss.

The cookies are good, but not enough of an improvement over the classic Quaker Oats recipe that I'd say you have to use this recipe. For Take 2, I'm looking at these Oatmeal Buttercream Pies. Any other recipe suggestions?

### **\$1.33 Holiday Brownies**

I just moved to Texas four days ago, and while the natives are kind, I'm somewhat limited in baking and cooking due to ALL my furniture and 90% of my belongings remaining in a moving truck that is well, not here.

Practicing gratitude and sleeping on the floor and feeling thankful for the little things that go right is healthy and all that, but sometimes everyone needs a spirit lifter. Here's an easy, cheap perk for a cold, drizzly night.

To make Holiday Brownies:

Buy 1 candy cane for .33 cents and one package classic brownie mix for .99 cents at the Dollar General Store. Pound candy cane into smithereens using available utensils – a cast iron pan on the counter for me. Mix brownies according to directions and add candy cane chips. If you have peppermint schnapps or peppermint extract, toss a drop or two in. Bake, cool for approximately 30 seconds and then eat half the pan. I recommend washing them down with plastic cups of a \$6 liter bottle of Merlot.

Happy cheap, holiday eats!

## Pumpkin Chocolate Chip Cookies

My mission to convince the world that pumpkin is more than a fall flavor continues with these delightful cookie bites. Somewhere between a cupcake and a cookie, these treats are fluffy, moist, not too sweet and far too edible. I took them to a BBQ and people raved, even the skeptics.

“Chocolate chip and pumpkin in a cookie? Ehhhh... [ugly face of distaste]” became: “Damn, these things are GOOD [followed by multiple trips back to the cookie bag].”

I started with the Food Network’s recipe and made some edits. I mean really, who prefers milk chocolate to semi-sweet chocolate? And for the size of the cookies, mini chips are WAY better for distribution. Not to mention that life goes on even if ya don’t have brown sugar. Here’s what I made:

### Ingredients

- 1 cup (2 sticks) butter, softened
- 1 3/4 cup white sugar
- 2 large eggs
- 1 generous tsp vanilla extract
- 1 cup (8 oz) canned pumpkin puree
- 2 1/2 cups all-purpose flour
- 1/2 cup whole wheat flour
- 2 tsp baking soda
- 1/2 tsp salt
- 1 tsp ground cinnamon
- 1/2 tsp ground ginger
- 1/4 tsp ground nutmeg
- 1/4 tsp ground cloves
- 2 cups (12-ounce bag) mini semi-sweet chocolate chips



### Directions

1. Heat the oven to 350 degrees F. Spray cookie sheets with nonstick spray or line them with parchment paper.
2. Using a mixer, beat the butter until smooth. Beat in the sugar, a little at a time, until the mixture is light and fluffy. Beat in the eggs 1 at a time, then mix in the vanilla and pumpkin puree. Let me say again how much I love my KitchenAid, though a handmixer or mixing by hand would work just fine too.
3. Pause the mixer. Add 1 cup of flour, salt, cinnamon, ginger, nutmeg, and cloves. Slowly mix the flour mixture, adding the remaining flour and baking soda until it incorporates. You can also measure all the dry ingredients together and then add them, but really the only thing you’re trying to do is keep the leavening agent (baking soda) from getting wet first. TIP: So long as you put flour on the wet ingredients first, and add it last before blending, you save a bowl! Stir in the chocolate chips.
4. Scoop the cookie dough by heaping tablespoons onto the prepared cookie sheets and bake for 12 minutes, or until the cookies are browned around the edges. Remove the cookie sheets from the oven and let them rest

for 2 minutes. Don't skip this! They need the 2 minutes to firm up. Take the cookies off with a spatula and cool them on wire racks.

Makes approximately 60 cookies, which sounds like a lot, but they're bit-sized and easy to toss back. You will likely eat 6 before you realize it, so make the whole batch and plan to share.



## Triple Layer Mint Oreo Brownies

Last weekend I hosted a champagne tea party with girlfriends – heavy on the champagne, light on the tea. I wanted to offer an ode to St. Patrick’s Day, and chose this recipe from Averie Cooks for my green needs.

Warning: These brownies are not for the faint of heart — neither the making nor the eating.

### Ingredients

- 1/8 tsp mint extract OR 2 tsp finely chopped fresh mint
- green food coloring
- 7 oz jar marshmallow fluff
- 1 batch of brownies (use 1 box of brownie mix – make according to directions on the box)
- 1 package Cool Mint Oreo Cookies, hand-crumbled
- 3/4 cup white chocolate chips, melted
- 1/2 cup butter or margarine, softened
- 3 to 4 cups powdered sugar
- 1 tsp vanilla extract
- splash of milk, if necessary for consistency

1. Preheat oven to 350°F. Line a 9×13-inch pan with foil and spray it with cooking spray. In medium bowl, stir together marshmallow fluff, mint extract\* or chopped mint (be very careful; a little bit of mint goes a very long way), and 4 drops of food coloring, or until light green is achieved.

2. In a large bowl, prepare the brownie mix as directed on box, using water, oil, eggs. Once blended, fold in 12 hand-crumbled Oreos at the end. Your hands will be green, greasy and minty fresh.

3. Spread brownie batter in prepared pan. Drop about 1/2 cup of green minty marshmallow mixture onto brownie batter and reserve the remainder. Gently pull a table knife through the batter in S-shaped curves for a swirled design. Bake 25 to 30 minutes or until brownies are set, taking care not to overbake. Cool completely, about 1 hour, or put the pan into the freezer for 10 minutes if you’re rushed.

4. While brownies are cooling, make vanilla frosting (or use 1 cup storebought vanilla frosting). Combine 1/2 cup softened butter, 1 tsp vanilla and 1 cup powdered sugar until smooth. Add 2-3 more cups powdered sugar until a sticky but smooth frosting merges. Add a dash of milk if needed. Beat until fluffy.

5. In a small microwave-safe bowl, melt the white chocolate chips (microwave on high for 30 seconds; stir and microwave 30 seconds longer; stir until smooth, taking care not to scorch it as white chocolate scorches easily). Add the melted white chocolate chips to the vanilla frosting, stir. Add the reserved green minty marshmallow mixture. Stir in 4 drops+ food coloring, or until light green color is reached. Spread the green frosting mixture over the cooled brownies. Sprinkle with 18 hand-crumbled Oreo Cookies, slightly pressing them into the green mixture.

6. Tightly seal the brownies with plastic wrap followed by foil, and place the bars in the refrigerator until the top layer fully sets. Cutting these brownies takes some muscle, or a sharper knife than I own. These are rich

and fudgy, and last in the refrigerator for at least a week — well, unless you eat them that is. Let the brownies come to room temperature for a few minutes before eating.

700 years later — They're done! And it is the damnedest thing — these came out like the picture!

Note: Use regular Oreos if you can't find Mint Oreos and possibly add a touch more mint extract to the 'green minty marshmallow mixture' in Step 1 if desired.

## Crustless Coconut Custard Pie

On Sunday at 3pm I was asked to bring a dessert to a dinner starting at 5pm. I didn't want to go to the store AGAIN, or buy something when I knew my hosts were cooking from scratch. I scrounged around a few recipe books and came across this gem in "Amen, Let's Eat!" I'd never made a custard pie before it but seemed reasonable enough.

Result? Total hit. Prep time is about 6 minutes and bake time is 45-60 minutes. Between coats of nail polish I pulled it off without a hitch. It's shockingly easy and more decadent than expected. Next time I might top it with a shake of powdered sugar.

### Ingredients:

- 1/2 cup all-purpose flour
- 1 cup sugar
- 2 cups milk – I used a combo of whole milk and rice milk – what I had on hand
- 4 eggs
- 6 TBS butter, melted – I used 3 TBS butter and 3 TBS margarine – again, what was in the fridge
- 1/2 tsp vanilla extract
- 1/2 tsp coconut extract
- 1/4 teaspoon salt
- 1-1/2 to 2 cups flaked coconut, preferably unsweetened



### Directions:

1. Preheat oven to 350°. Spray or butter a 9-inch wide pie pan.
  2. Add all of the ingredients to a blender. Process on 'liquefy' for 15 seconds. Pour the mixture into the prepared pie pan. That's it! One blender and one pan are all it takes to go from ho-hum wine bearer to "I'm the kind of dinner guest who brings over a homemade pie still warm from the oven. Boom."
  3. Bake the pie for 40 – 55 minutes, watching carefully after the first 40 minutes. The pie will puff up a bit and then fall slightly in the middle — totally normal. It's done when a knife in the middle comes out clean and the edges are lightly browned. TIP: You don't want to overcook or it'll get rubbery and sulfur-ish smelling.
- Remove the pie from the oven to cool. Serve warm or place in the refrigerator to chill. It's even better cold the next day.

## Lemon Puff Pastry

In the spirit of bookclub culinary adventures, I dipped my toe into the uncharted waters of Martha Stewart cooking. There was more trepidation than usual, and her definition of “easy” is still a few too many steps for me. But in the end, it was a success! Adapted from her Meyer Lemon Pastry recipe, here’s my (simplified) version that was the perfect way to round out a tasty picnic at Breaux Vineyards.

- 7 lemons (I used regular, though Martha recommends Meyer lemons)
- 1 thawed puff pastry sheet
- 2 cups water
- 1.5 cups granulated sugar (divided)
- 1 egg
- 1 tsp. vanilla extract
- 1 pint heavy whipping cream
- Flour for rolling
- Parchment paper

1. Bring water and 1 cup granulated sugar to a simmer in a medium saucepan over medium heat. Cook, stirring, until sugar dissolves, about 5 minutes.

2. Cut out a circle of parchment that fits inside the saucepan. Add lemons to sugar water, and lay the parchment circle on top of the lemons. Simmer gently until lemons are soft and translucent, about 1 1/2 hours. At this point I let my lemons cool, then refrigerated them for 36 hours. They can be refrigerated for up to 1 week in the sugar syrup.

3. Remove lemons from syrup, and transfer to a wire rack set over a baking sheet to drain. Reserve remaining syrup in pan.

4. Heat oven to 400 degrees. Roll out puff pastry on a lightly floured surface to an 11-by-14-inch rectangle. Transfer to a parchment-paper lined cookie sheet. Lightly press a 1-inch border around edges using a fork. Brush entire surface of dough with egg wash, and sprinkle with 1/4 cup sugar (more or less). Bake for ~ 20 minutes.

5. With an immersion blender or mixer, whisk the cream, 1/4 cup sugar, 1 tsp vanilla and 1/4 – 1/2 cup of reserved syrup until soft peaks form.

6. Lay lemon slices on top of baked puff pastry, top with whipped lemon cream and serve. I would suggest pairing it with Breaux’s 2011 Jolie Blond for a crisp flavor punch.

## Fudge: the stuff of legends

Someday, SOMEDAY I will pick up the correct kind of canned milk: sweetened condensed for pumpkin, evaporated for fudge. Yesterday was not that day.

But despite my lack of literacy, I managed to make it work. In case you're ever in the same bind, here's a kick butt fudge recipe:

- 7 oz. jar marshmallow fluff
- Fudge with pecan pieces
- 3 cups white sugar
- 8 oz. ghiradelli dark chocolate chips
- 5 oz. nestle semisweet chocolate chips
- 4 oz. sweetened, condensed milk
- 2 oz. almond milk
- 1.5 sticks of butter (salted, of course)
- 1/2 cup chopped pecans
- 1 tsp. vanilla



Line a 9×13 pan with foil or butter it down. Melt the sugar, butter and milks in a saucepan over medium heat. I recommend a nonstick pan. Stirring almost constantly, bring the mixture to a boil for 4 minutes – or until the sugar mixture starts to turn a bit golden. Stir constantly. Remove from heat. Add in chocolate and marshmallow fluff, stirring until smooth. Drop in pecans and vanilla. Yep, stir. Spread quickly into pan and let sit for approximately 2 hours to cool. Or until you can't resist a nibble. Viola!

## BANANAS

My parents don't recall when they introduced me to vegetables or what my response was. However, buried in the scant writing of my baby book there is a statement that continues to define my tastes: "Penney loves bananas!"

I took banana baby food for lunch in jars through junior high. Once I could drive, my post school treat was often a banana milkshake from Sonic. I received a hand-painted monkey banana holder from my big sis for my first apartment.

I can admit teaching my little sister to spell the word through Gwen Stefani's Hollaback Girl song, "The sh\*t is bananas, b-a-n-a-n-a-s!" — with lyrics edited for a 4-year old of course. I keep a bunch of bananas on hand whenever possible. If I could figure out how to travel without them turning into bruised mush, I would never need another Lara bar.

All that said, I'm not a big banana bread fan. It tastes like heavy, grease-laden, semi-sweet flour on my tongue. My preferred approaches to banana consumption include:

- Plain and slightly green. Maybe with almond or peanut butter
- [Banana's Foster: Gotta love it en flambe, and it makes an impressive camping dessert too.](#)
- [Banana Pudding: Using banana creme pudding instead of vanilla.](#)
- Banana Cream Pie: No chocolate or caramel, and minimal fluff on top. I don't actually have a go-to recipe for this one. I dig this article from the NYT on perfecting the homemade version, though.
- [Grilled Bananas.](#) My little sister's girl scout troop made these and she brought home the recipe. Surprisingly satisfactory, especially if you add a few chocolate chips to the skin for melty goodness.

I recently stumbled across this article on the [history of bananas in the American diet](#) and feel obligated to share it. Peel on, folks!

## Chocolate Chip Cookie Bars

Aka Bigger, Faster, Better Chocolate Chip Cookies

Okay, so they're actually not cookies per se, but bars. Chocolate chip cookie bars. I discovered the recipe through a glance at the classic Nestle Tollhouse recipe. I was feeling lazy and craving something melty-chocolatey.

*The "Before" Photo -raw cookie dough smooshed into a greased 9x13 pan*

To achieve this easy success of gooey goodness, follow the Tollhouse recipe on the semi-sweet chocolate chip bag. But three secret family tips:

- 1) Add in a handful of uncooked oats,
- 2) Use a 50/50 blend of semisweet and dark cocoa chips, and
- 3) Toss in 1/2 cup of pecans.

Bake at 375 degrees for 20 minutes and check with the toothpick test. Let it cool 15 minutes or so before delving in, to ensure the chocolate chips set. In two rounds, I've found the edges get a bit overdone, which may be a plus in your book, depending on your flavor preferences. With any luck, your birthday boy will enjoy it as much as mine.

May I recommend a glass of whiskey on the rocks to accompany this fine dessert?



## Economical and Fast Peach Cobbler

Baking is a comfort activity for my mind and hands, and in the past few weeks I've needed some extra TLC. For a recent meet up with girlfriends, I decided to make a peach cobbler from scratch! I adapted my version from [this Food Network recipe](#).

The biggest change I made involved simplifying the peach process. For one, peaches aren't in season here in the DC area. Two, those really ripe, juicy peaches can get pricey! Three, I don't want to blanch peaches and then burn myself pulling off their hot skins. Solution: enter frozen and canned peaches.

### Filling Ingredients:

- 1 – 1.5 pound bag of frozen peaches
- 1 large can of peach pieces, in light syrup (I don't remember the size, and I bought generic. It was bigger than a 12.5 oz can – that's all I've got)
- 3/4 cup brown sugar
- 1 tsp cinnamon
- Juice of 1 lemon
- 1 tsp vanilla
- 1 TBS flour

### Crust Ingredients (even though it's really a topping and not a bottom crust):

- 1 cup flour
- 1 teaspoon baking powder
- 1/2 teaspoon baking soda
- 3 tablespoons brown sugar
- 4 tablespoons butter, cut into small pieces
- Zest of 1 lemon
- 2/3 cup nonfat plain greek yogurt (you can also use sour cream or buttermilk – I just have yogurt on hand more often)



### DIRECTIONS

1. Preheat the oven to 425 degrees F.
2. Butter a 1 1/2-quart shallow baking dish. Place all the peaches in the dish and sprinkle them with brown sugar, cinnamon, vanilla, lemon juice and flour. Mix gently and spread evenly again. Bake for 10 minutes.
3. Meanwhile, combine all dry ingredients (plus lemon zest) for the crust in a bowl. Cut in the butter with a pastry cutter or your fingers, to make the texture like coarse crumbs. Add the yogurt and stir to form a soft dough. I had some trouble incorporating all the dry ingredients and my end product was a little crumbly.
4. Remove the fruit from oven and drop rounded spoonfuls of dough on top. Rounded can be a very loose term. Return to oven. Bake until fruit is bubbly and crust topping is golden brown, about 17-20 minutes. When you remove it from the oven, the fruit and crust will sink in a bit. You can serve it plain, with ice cream,



whipped cream, or regular cream. Note: If transporting this, I recommend placing a cookie sheet under it, as it's juicy!

Between five women and one husband, we ate the ENTIRE pan. It's not too sweet, not too rich, and it's warm and comforting, best shared among friends.

## Entertaining

- **Sweet Bliss Spring Brunch Menu**
- **10 Easy Sippin' Wines**
- **Mid-Week Mexican Dinner Party Menu**
- **Hostessing When It's Hot**
- **Cooking Be Damned**
- **Cheese for the Lactose Intolerant**
- **Thanksgiving Menu**
- **St. Patrick's Day Menu**
-

## Sweet Bliss Spring Brunch Menu

I am part of a small group of ladies that started as a book club, devolved into a drinking club, then re-emerged as a brunching club. Though we sometimes try new restaurants, typically we take turns cooking at each other's places. We love to cook, you see. And pop bottles of bubbly.

We had much to celebrate, including a promotion, a job interview, world traveling, and several resolutions focused on mindful, healthful eating. Usually I wax poetic about edibles I've personally made. Not today. I attended a brunch where my only contributions consisted of Pepperidge Farm's Milano cookies and a purple flowering plant for the hostess.

The menu was delectable – think strawberries, goat cheese, fennel, asparagus, marscapone, zucchini – salty, sweet, crunchy, soft. I could have licked every plate clean. For decorum's sake, I stuck to sucking olive oil off my fingers instead.

Check out these amazing, springy recipes that will make your taste buds flutter with happiness:

- [Savory Goat-Cheese Strawberry Crostinis](#)

Tip: Make more than you think you'll need. And then double that.

- [Fennel and Smoked Salmon Salad](#)

Tip: Rest the fennel in the lemon juice to pull out some of the bitter licorice flavor. Even if you don't think you like fennel, you'll be pleasantly surprised. Martha Stewart is rarely wrong. And it's a one-step dish.

- [Roasted Asparagus with Poached Eggs and Parmesan](#)

Tip: The chef-ette made soft-boiled eggs instead of poaching, and also roasted the asparagus in the sauce. Seriously, if asparagus didn't result in nose-numbing sulfuric-smelling pee, I'd eat this combo 3x a day.

- [Sweet Strawberry Brunch Bruchetta](#)

Tip: Wheat bread probably is fine, but French baguette is better. Also, marscapone dries out quickly so cover with plastic wrap if not serving immediately.

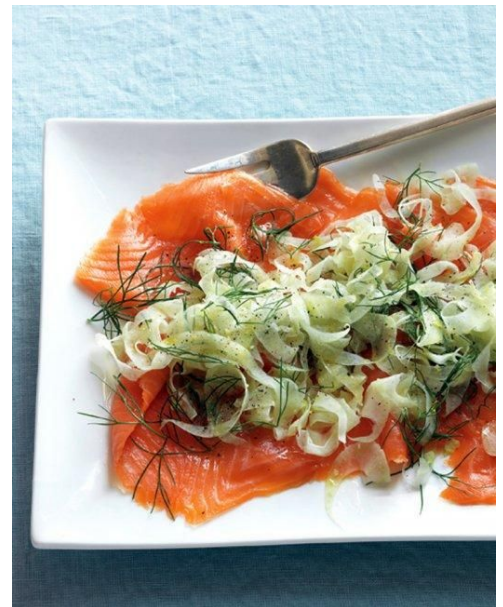
- [Strawberry Balsamic Salad with Basil and Feta](#)

Tip: Hopefully you found a great strawberry sale, 'cuz after this salad you're gonna want more. Especially in hot weather.

- [Zucchini Rounds with Sun-dried Tomatoes and Goat Cheese](#)

Pop one of these and you'll be singing along with Belinda Carlisle, "Oooh heaven is a place on earth!"

Continuing my modicum of decorum act, I daintily selected a few rounds at a time and slide them onto my plate. About halfway through brunch the hostess nicely informed me that I could in fact eat all of



them, as she had another plate.

Tip: Soak the sun-dried tomatoes in barely simmering olive oil for about five minutes on the stove before layering them.

- Mimosas and coffee – obviously. Repeat. Cheers!
-

## 10 Easy Sippin' Wines

If I'm heading to dinner at a friend's and want to bring something –or if I moved all weekend and want to enjoy several glass myself –here are a few of my stand-by wine picks that are easy on the budget and on the palate, and are readily available at most grocery stores for \$12 or less:

**RED** – I don't like the sensation of sucking on bark, so these are more fruit-forward and not oak-y.

- Menage a Trois Red – don't get embarrassed, it's just the name
- Ravenswood Old Vine Zinfandel
- Zaleo – Tempranillo – zero oak, young, a new find that makes me mellow
- Yellow Tail – Syrah – you've probably had this at a dinner party or bookclub

**WHITE** – I like crisp whites, not too sweet or buttery. I dig a little zing on my tongue at the end. Die, Chardonnay, die!

- Vinho Verde (any brand) – cheap, refreshing, soft carbonation, a green wine
- Kim Crawford Sauvignon Blanc – zesty, a little tang at the end
- Chateau St. Michelle Riesling – not too sweet, best very chilled

**BUBBLES** – I love champagne – the lightness, the happy feelings. I could drink bubbles any time of day.

- Freixenet Cordon Negro Cava – good for sipping and mixing; classic happiness in a bottle
- Barefood 'Bubbly Extra Dry' Champagne – yes, it's Barefood brand but delish
- Riondo Prosecco – these bubbles are smaller than a sparkling wine or true champagne, and more refreshing too.

"Bubbles! My bubbles!" – Bubbles the fish from Finding Nemo

*True story: Work, ordering cases of bubbles...*

## Mid-week Mexican Fiesta

I love lists.

I would rather write lists than do the things on the lists. Lists make me feel organized, ahead of the game. They help me plan groceries, meals, packing. I use them to stay awake in boring meetings. I practice drawing the perfectly rounded bullets and dots that litter my pages. I use lists to appear to be organized, even when I'm not. Right now I have 9 separate lists on my desk, and what am I doing? Blogging about my lists.

I am also a stacker. I make pretty piles: of dishes, of papers, of folders, of books, of place mats, of blankets, of pillows – all artfully arranged. Oddly, this desire for and love of organization does not roll over into a need for cleanliness. Orderly? Yes, definitely. Clean? Meh.

Tonight we are hosting our first 'dinner party' for another couple. I've met the husband once and never the wife, and though I'm not shy, I am a mildly stressed hostess. I'm opting for a Mexican theme for ease and a reason to drink margaritas on a Wednesday.

The menu includes:

- Ruby Red Grapefruit margaritas (family recipe)
- Mexican Fiesta Main Course - Ole!
- Negro Model beer
- Chilled cucumber slices and baby carrots with roasted red pepper hummus
- Black bean corn salsa with baked tortilla chips
- [Chicken enchiladas with salsa verde](#)
- Black beans and cumin
- Sorbet with Pepperidge Farm cookies

Even though my stress levels are higher than normal for a Wednesday night, I do have a my lists to lean on – one for the menu, the groceries, the housecleaning tasks, the table decorations – and I feel a bit better.

## When It's Too Hot to Cook

I don't.

Yesterday I invited a girlfriend over for dinner, thinking that between the frozen chicken, veggies and assorted pantry stock, I could come up with a fine meal. Plus, I had 2 bottles of red wine.

The meal evolved something like this:

- 1 hour before: Riding the bus home, mentally piecing together a delightful, healthy dinner of teriyaki chicken, brown rice, edamame, sauteed spinach, perhaps some dark chocolate for dessert.
- 30 minutes before: Cranking up the A/C, sticking head in the freezer, panting at the thought of turning on the oven, tapping fingertips on the counter in thought.
- 15 minutes before: Drinking a cold beer, dicing tomatoes, cutting up basil, pulling out assorted snack foods and hoping the colorful, cloth napkins on the freshly dusted table will make up for the lack of entree.

Actual Dinner: wasabi almonds, sharp white cheddar cheese, sesame rice crackers, lemon hummus, baby carrots, tomato-avocado-basil-chickpea salad, pesto spread, cherry preserves, pita chips, dried fruit medley, Zinfandel, Jamaican ginger beer, and sweet potato pudding (the last two were contributions from my guest).

I needn't have worried. We ate and talked, chatted and noshed. Neither of us left hungry, and there was something a bit whimsical and light-hearted about picking out and eating only my favorite items. Didn't feel like carrots? Not to worry. Hankering for some salty cheese? Enjoy!

We both decided that rice cracker + cherry preserves + sharp cheddar was the best combination. Cheers to no cooking nights!

## Cooking Be Damned

Sure, cooking can be enjoyable and fulfilling, connecting me to food and expanding my creativity. But not of late; it simply feels like a ton of effort. After I finished a workout this morning and felt hunger pangs urging me on, I tried to get excited about making pesto scrambled eggs and wilted garlic spinach. Fail.

I ate a banana, whole wheat cinnamon raisin bread ([you can make your own!](#) I bought mine) with peanut butter and half an avocado.

I recently read a phrase about how to be successful in your life pursuits, be they work, fitness, relationships, whatever. It suggested that the best thing you can do for yourself is be honest about your weaknesses so that you can plan around them.

The alternative is what [Joan Didion](#) calls “magical thinking.” For those of us who are perpetually late, magical thinking goes something like this, “Of COURSE I can get there in 10 minutes. I did that one time, you know.” In reality, 99% of the time it takes 25 minutes, but we prefer to think that magically what we want to happen will actually happen. Basically, it’s our successful self delusions.

For instance, I can say, “Tomorrow I’ll get up early, go for a jog and feel great all day! Woo-yah!” In truth, I love sleeping far too much to get up for a morning workout. I can count on one hand the number of times I’ve succeeded in rising with the alarm with nothing but my willpower driving me. This is a weakness that I can choose to ignore and then feel guilty every single time I hit the snooze button.

Or, I can find a trainer and PAY someone to kick my ass 4 days a week, knowing there’s a group of fit ladies that I want to compete with. When the alarm sounds, I remind myself that I paid good money for this, that the trainer is waiting, and when the [Super Spartan race](#) comes around, I’m going to be so glad I did those 4,000 lunges and hours of holding plank position.

Same for cooking. Part of me WANTS to cook a wholesome, flavorful meal that I can sit and enjoy, and happily pack up leftovers. But truthfully, if I’m cooking for one, I just want to make something relatively healthy in 10 minutes or less with minimal decision making or brainpower required. Enter one of my favorite fallbacks: [New York Times’ 101 Simple Meals Ready in 10 Minutes or Less](#). (This came out in 2007? Feelin’ old now). Though I’m not sure “Boil a lobster” is an easy option in my definition, there are some winners.

In sum: self-delusion is out, self-reflection is in. And cooking be damned.



## Cheese for the Lactose Intolerant

I love cheese but my guts hate it with the fury of a thousand scorned, female Titans. I'll suffer the gut-wrenching after-effects sometimes in the name of amazing pizza or comfort cravings, but generally I TRY to steer clear. Until now. What's all the fuss?

ALSO KNOWN as hypolactasia, lactose intolerance is a condition affecting people (mostly adults) who lack a sufficient amount of the enzyme lactase in their digestive systems to metabolize milk sugar, or lactose. For some people, the effects are minimal, and they just sort of put up with it. For others, even a mention of "milk" makes them run in the other direction, clutching their abdomens.^

Gruyere is on the happy tummy list

Turns out, low-lactose cheese exists! Apparently they aren't all necessarily found in the super-stinky cheese family either. (I once ate some cheese that I swear to was merely bleached horse manure).

In one of the more scientific studies\*I encountered (aka not some dude spouting off about the evils of bovine dairy), the following cheeses containing undetectable quantities of lactose and galactose:

- Gruyere
- Emmental (block, sliced and grated)
- Jarlsberg
- Parmigiano Reggiano (American Parmesan is aged for only 10 months and is likely to be higher in lactose)
- Grana Padano Italian Parmesan
- Mature Cheddar cheese from the UK West Country Farmhouse Cheese Makers Association
- Blue cheeses like Stilton

Cheeses to avoid include: Gouda, Edam, Brie and Processed cheeses (cheese triangles and cheese spread — looking at you, Velveeta). Cheese spread kinda surprised me since I figured it wasn't real cheese, it couldn't have high milk. WRONG. It has more lactose as milk solids are added as stabilizers and thickeners precisely because it doesn't have whey in it.

Also, soft cheeses are worse since they still have all that wet whey loaded with lactose hanging out, which makes the whole 'goat-cheese is better for your stomach' a myth: "Fresh cheeses likely will present a problem, and those with lactose issues should tread very carefully around fresh mozzarella, fresh ricotta, cream cheese, burrata, and maybe even brie, depending on the level of sensitivity."^

**TIP:** "Pareve" or "Parve" Labeled Foods do not contain lactose. Because Jewish dietary laws require separation of meat and milk, the "Pareve" marking is used to identify products that contain neither meat nor dairy-based ingredients.

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\* Portnoj, P. A. and MacDonald, A. (2009), Determination of the lactose and galactose content of cheese for use in the galactosaemia diet. *Journal of Human Nutrition and Dietetics*, 22: 400–408.

<http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/j.1365-277X.2009.00948.x/abstract> . Web text:

[http://www.foodsmatter.com/allergy\\_intolerance/lactose\\_intolerance/articles/low\\_lactose\\_cheese.html](http://www.foodsmatter.com/allergy_intolerance/lactose_intolerance/articles/low_lactose_cheese.html)

[^http://www.commonnews.org/site/site05/story.php?articulo=6420&page=2#.USaRkqWTyXg](http://www.commonnews.org/site/site05/story.php?articulo=6420&page=2#.USaRkqWTyXg)

## We Give Thanks Menu

It's cool, you can be jealous of the awesomeness that is to be our Thanksgiving meal:

- Organic, fresh (never frozen) wallop of a turkey from [Arganica Farm](#)
- [Cranberry- Mango Sauce](#)
- Broccoli-Cheese Casserole – Damis family recipe
- [Barefoot Contessa Sausage Stuffing](#)
- Garlic Cream Cheese Mashed Potatoes
- Roasted Brussel Sprouts with Lemon Aioli
- [Goat Cheese-Pesto-Sundried Tomato Torta](#)
- Pumpkin Pie – Mama Wheatley style
- [Chocolate – Dipped Clementines](#)
- [Harvest Apple Crumb Pie](#) – benefitting a good cause

Foodwise, I think I'm most excited about the mashed potatoes, brussel sprouts and goat cheese torta. Well, and seeing a 20 pound turkey be successfully cooked – which is in the hands of the male in the house (no, not the cat, silly!). Okay, I really just love all the savory flavors that come together for Thanksgiving. And when else do I get to buy as much sage as I want?

Gastronomy aside, I'm feeling very happy about hosting my mom and big sister and sharing the apartment with the boyfriend this year. I haven't seen my mom in about a year or my big sis since July. It'll be a squeeze of people in the one-bedroom but with plenty of libations to enliven the mood. We all have our health, loves and jobs. Which is more than many.

As one of our activities – since I'll be damned if we sit on our asses and lose our patience with each other as the only activity – we've all agreed to create a cocktail for the others to try. I'll be shaking and pouring a [gin-based aviation](#). I'm not a fan of Beefeater gin, though, and prefer Hedrick's or Bombay.

I thought about going all holiday spirit and trying one of these 12 Days of Holiday Cocktails. Then I noticed that they all involve something creamy, and this lactose intolerant lady isn't down for that.

Cheers to food, friends and family!

November 21, 2011



## A Green-Themed, St. Patrick's Day Dinner

This year I just don't feel like drinking green-dyed beer or watching people get shit-faced, pee in the street and pinch arses in public while winking like deranged leprechaun. Despite my red curly hair, I'm not Irish. Sorry to disappoint.

Instead, come Saturday night, I'm making a green meal (the color, not the eco-conscious kind of green) for some dear friends of mine. Our festive feast will include:

- Guacamole with green tortilla chips
- Edamame dip served with raw broccoli florets, celery and green bell pepper strips
- Spinach enchiladas with salsa verde
- Cilantro-infused jasmine rice
- Mint chocolate chip ice cream – or green tea ice cream, haven't decided yet

Whether I imbibe a pint of Guinness or Harp, or just drink some red wine, I support Dogfish Head's quote, "No green beer, just stick with great beer this St Patty's Day." I'll toast to that.



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## Pasta

- **Truly Southern Shrimp 'n Grits**
- **Broccoli-Cheese Quinoa Casserole**
- **Baked (yes, baked) Pea and Spinach Risotto**
- **Chicken Spaghetti (with Flair)**
- **Mac 'n Cheese – Better than Your Mama's**

## “Holy moley!” Shrimp and Parmesan Grits

The only way to enjoy grits is to add butter and cheese. Then add more butter and cheese. This was the first time I made this dish, and while it’s delish, it’s also decidedly not heart healthy. Which makes this recipe perfect for sharing!

For our first Friends-giving this week, B and I each made a memorable dish. His German Potato Salad is practically legendary now, but my shrimp and grits held their own in the taste test. I’d make this again. In fact, the hubby declared, “Holy moley! These are good!” Thanks for the recipe, Aunt Judy – and Southern Living.

### PARMESAN GRITS:

- 1 tsp salt
- 2 cups uncooked quick-cooking grits
- 14 oz. grated Parmesan cheese (not the powdery stuff)
- 1 tsp freshly ground pepper
- 3 TBS butter

### SHRIMP SAUCE:

- At least 2 pounds unpeeled, medium-size, raw shrimp
- pepper and salt
- vegetable cooking spray
- 2 TBS olive oil
- 2 TBS all-purpose flour
- 1 tsp corn starch mixed with 1 TBS water til smooth
- 2 1/2 cups low-sodium chicken broth
- 1/2 cup chopped green onions
- 4 garlic cloves, minced
- 4 TBS fresh lemon juice
- 1/2 tsp grated lemon rind
- 1/2 tsp hot sauce
- 2 cups fresh baby spinach
- parsley and lemon slices for topping



### DIRECTIONS:

1. Prepare Parmesan Grits: Bring 1 tsp. salt and 8 cups water to a boil in a medium saucepan. Gradually whisk in grits. Cook over medium heat, stirring occasionally, 8 minutes or until thickened. Whisk in cheese and pepper and butter until smooth. Taste and keep warm.

TIP: Use a whisk – it helps the fluffiness factor. 2. Prepare Creamy Shrimp Sauce: Peel shrimp; devein and/or detail, if desired. Sprinkle shrimp with pepper and 1/8 tsp. salt – I tossed them with salt and pepper in a colander. Cook in a large nonstick skillet coated with cooking spray over medium-high heat 1 to 2 minutes on each side or just until shrimp turn pink. Remove shrimp from skillet with slotted spoon.

3. Keep the skillet on the stove. Reduce heat to medium. Add oil; heat 30 seconds. Whisk in flour; cook 30 seconds to 1 minute. Whisk in broth, green onions, garlic, lemon juice, half of the lemon rind and all the hot sauce. Bring to a boil and cook 2 to 3 minutes or until thickened. TIP: If the roux never thickens add the corn starch mixture and boil one minute. Stir in shrimp until heated through. Taste broth and add salt, pepper and/or more hot sauce as desired.

4. Pour grits into serving dish. Add spinach leaves. Top spinach with shrimp and sauce. Sprinkle with parsley, lemon slices and lemon rind. Serve immediately or keep warm. TIP: Nobody likes congealed grits.

This made a LOT of grits — more than one 9×13 pan could handle. Next time I'll serve in two pans, but in the meantime, who is excited about leftovers? This girl!

## Broccoli Cheese Quinoa Casserole

I generally consider casseroles to be sad, overcooked, under-spiced concoctions served lukewarm at church dinners with low expectations.

But lo! It is not so! This recipe changed my mind and I can't get enough of it. No... really, I try not to eat the whole pan in one sitting. After trying this at a friends' home where two kiddos live, I modified it from the original recipe for a more adult palate. My significant other tops it with hot sauce for a bit more punch.

### Ingredients

It's not gonna win any beauty contests, but it is a fiiiine piece of comfort food eating.

- 10 oz can condensed cream of broccoli OR cream of mushroom soup
- 1/3 cup mayonnaise (I use canola mayonnaise to avoid trans fats)
- 2 TBS milk or milk-product
- 1 1/2 cups-ish reduced fat sharp cheddar shredded cheese
- 1 cup grated Parmesan cheese, divided
- 1 TB white sugar
- 1 tsp black pepper
- 4 TBS+ whole grain mustard (Don't skip this)
- 1/2 tsp ground nutmeg (Don't overdo this)
- 1 tsp+ salt, to taste
- 32 oz bag of frozen broccoli, thawed in the microwave and coarsely chopped
- 1 1/2 cups COOKED quinoa (see below)

### Directions

1. Cook quinoa: combine 3/4 cup quinoa, 1 1/2 cups water and 1/4 tsp salt. Bring to a boil over high heat. Reduce heat to low and cover. Cook for 18-20 minutes, or until fluffy and the white ring/tail is visible. Fluff with a fork.

2. Preheat oven to 350 degrees and coat a shallow 9x13 casserole dish with vegetable cooking spray.

3. In a large bowl combine the soup, mayonnaise, milk, shredded cheese, sugar, pepper, mustard, 1/2 cup Parmesan and nutmeg until well mixed. Stir in the quinoa and chopped broccoli.

4. Spoon mixture into prepared dish. Top with remaining Parmesan cheese. Bake for 35-40 minutes or until bubbly on the edges and golden. Let it cool for 10 minutes before serving — or dive in and scald your tongue.

Makes 6 adult-sized portions.





## Baked Pea and Spinach Risotto

Generally I'm not a fan of Real Simple recipes; they're bland and dull. Simple taken too far = boring. However, with the addition of my trusty cooking sidekick, Lemon Pepper seasoning, this baked risotto comes together easily.

Plus, there's a fair amount of veggies you can add to risotto to keep nutrients high. And the best part? No standing at the stove sweating for an hour, hoping the broth incorporates!

- 4 TBS butter
- 2 shallots, chopped
- salt and black pepper
- 1 tsp lemon pepper seasoning
- 1/2 cup dry white wine
- 6 1/2 cups vegetable or chicken broth
- 2 cups Arborio rice
- 1 package frozen peas
- 8 ounces baby spinach, roughly chopped (about 4 cups)
- 1/2 cup grated Parmesan or Asiago, plus more for serving

### Directions

Heat oven to 425° F. Heat the butter in a medium Dutch oven or ovenproof pot over medium-high heat. Add the shallot, 1 tsp salt, and 1 tsp pepper and cook, stirring often, until soft, 3 to 5 minutes. Add the wine and cook, stirring, until almost evaporated, 2 to 3 minutes.

Add the broth and rice and bring to a rolling boil. Add 1/2 tsp lemon pepper. Stir briefly.

Cover the pot and transfer to oven. Cook until the rice is tender and creamy, about 25 minutes.

Remove from oven. Add the peas, spinach, Parmesan, 1/2 tsp lemon pepper, and ¼ teaspoon pepper to the pot and stir to combine.

Return to oven for 5 more minutes. Remove and stir. If the risotto is too thick, add up to ¼ cup hot water. Sprinkle with additional Parmesan before serving.

You can half ingredients, and adding protein is always an option. As is, it made 6-8 servings. Now we have leftovers for days!

## Dressing Up Spaghetti

Perhaps one of the best things about cooking is realizing which flavors blend together. I often take a basic recipe then add a pinch of this, a shake of that, until it ends up better – more intense flavors, more depth, and yes, prettier. I admit this experimentation is not always successful (as noted by my failed habanero-chili salt-whiting fish experiment earlier this week). But I'd say I'm at least 75% from the free throw line.

Following a P90X workout, this adult version of chicken spaghetti hit the spot:

- 1 box thin spaghetti
- 1 tomato, diced
- 1/4 cup or so dry red wine
- 1/2 cup frozen spinach
- 1 jar marinara sauce
- 1/4 cup dried garlic chips
- 2 boneless, skinless chicken breasts
- 1/2 tsp garlic sea salt
- 1/4 tsp red pepper flakes
- 2 oz. goat cheese
- 2 sage leaves, finely chopped
- Pepper
- Olive Oil

Heat a medium- large skillet over low heat. Add olive oil and garlic chips. Throw in 2 chicken breasts, salting and peppering each side, turning every 3 minutes or so. You want a golden brown sear on each side, with garlic chips sticking to the chicken. Meanwhile, bring a large pot of water to boil with 1 tsp. of salt added.

When the chicken is 3/4 way cooked (it's okay to cut it to gauge doneness), either remove chicken from pan or leave in pan and cut it into 1/2 to 1/4 inch strips. Add diced tomato, marinara, wine, red pepper flakes and garlic sea salt. Heat thoroughly, stirring occasionally.

Add pasta to boiling water and follow directions to cook al dente. For the final 5-7 minutes of pasta cooking, add frozen spinach and chopped sage to the marina sauce pan, breaking it up and stirring as it dethaws. (There's no reason to dethaw in advance unless you like steaming piles of wet spinach on your counter.)

Drain pasta, return it to pan. Serve noodles with a ladle of sauce and dollop of goat cheese. If you're feeling fancy, stick a sage leaf in the goat cheese for effect. Viola!

## World's Best Mac 'n Cheese

Goey salty heaven

I kid you not. The Best.

And I have tasted and made many varieties in my day – powders, pouches, with seafood, with smelly fontina, with sharp cheddar, with a roux base, with bechamel sauce. This is my favorite.

My Bourbon Relay Race teammates agreed as we told stories and ate the night away. The toasted buttered panko crumbs made it.

Between a pan of this, a pan of veggie lasagna and a pot of BBQ turkey for sliders, pumpkin spice cookies and 4 bottles of wine – it was a helluva meal.



### Topping–

- 1 1/2 c. panko bread crumbs (These are Japanese breadcrumbs, which are flakier than regular breadcrumbs. If you can't find them with the other breadcrumbs, try the aisle that carries Asian food.)
- 4 T. butter
- 1/4 tsp. salt
- a few dashes of paprika
- Melt butter over medium-high heat, add salt and paprika. Add panko and coat thoroughly with butter. Stirring frequently, heat until toasted, about 8 minutes. Remove from heat and set aside.

### Mac and Cheese–

- 1lb. box of macaroni noodles (Feel free to use other noodles if you're feeling fancy; shells, cavatappi and gemelli work well in this.)
- 2 eggs
- 2 12 oz. cans of evaporated milk (Do not use fat free evaporated milk, it will not give the same result and seriously, when you see how much cheese is in this, who are you kidding using fat free milk anyways?)
- 2 tsp. powdered dry mustard
- 1 tsp. salt
- 1/2 tsp black pepper
- 1/2 tsp. Tabasco
- 16 oz shredded sharp cheddar
- 8 oz. shredded Parmesan cheese
- 8 oz. finely chopped Velveeta (All 3 cheeses should be combined into one bowl and tossed evenly with each other)
- 8 T. unsalted butter (note: see step 4 below)

1. Preheat oven to 400 degrees.

2. Combine cans of evaporated milk, eggs, mustard, salt, pepper, and Tabasco in a bowl and whisk together until ingredients are well-combined and eggs are completely beaten. Set aside. Be sure to do this before you boil the pasta because the eggs will need time to acclimate so they are not cold when being added to the pasta. You do not want the eggs to become scrambled eggs once added to hot pasta.

3. Boil pasta in salted water for the time given by the al dente instructions on the box.

4. Once pasta is cooked, drain and return to pot. Toss with unsalted butter until coated. If this is going to be eaten in one sitting, you can skip the butter. The butter helps seal the pasta and keep the leftovers from getting mushy from sitting in cheese sauce in your fridge, but if it's being eaten in one sitting this is a non-issue. (And we really do recommend eating it in one sitting. This recipe is best fresh)

5. Give evaporated milk mixture a few extra whisks and then add to pasta with half of cheese, stirring over medium to medium high heat until cheese is melted. Add remaining cheese and continue stirring until thoroughly melted.

6. Transfer to a large baking dish and top with toasted panko. Bake on top rack of oven for 20 to 25 minutes. If you use a disposable foil pan, place a cookie sheet underneath it while baking so the bottom doesn't burn.

7. Try not to eat the entire pan.

The end result is a creamy, cheesy macaroni and cheese that is anything but bland. I usually only make this if I'm having company because it does produce quite a bit and it is like crack. I wasn't kidding about trying not to eat the entire pan. Take a pan to your next family picnic and you will be worshipped!

Try it. Love it. Share it.

My thanks to [We Heart This blog](#) for the recipe.

## Seafood

- **Whitefish Aioli Sandwich**
- **Saffron Seafood Risotto**
- **Salmon with Roasted Bell Peppers and Lemon**
- **Coconut Curry Salmon**
- **Bangladeshi Shrimp with Pumpkin**
- **Salmon with Honey-Mustard Pan Sauce**
- **Homemade Smoked Salmon**
- **Citrus-Salsa Salmon**

## Whitefish Aioli Sandwich

For some reason or another, making sandwiches is something that stimulates my creative side (and I'm not even sure I have a creative side). Maybe it's the simplicity of them: bread, meat product, cheese, maybe veggies, and some delicious tangy (or spicy) condiment. The possible combinations of all these edible variables is endless, but I'm damn sure going to try to get to the end.

On a lazy Saturday night I was hungry and feeling creative. The first selection for me is the meat product or base of the sandwich. While not technically a "meat" the cheap frozen whitefish in my freezer was my choice. Who doesn't love a good fish fry? And why not put it on a sandwich? From there I went to work. Here are the ingredients for this simple creation (I really didn't measure anything):

### Sandwich

- Some kind of whitefish (whiting, cod, etc.)
- Bread crumbs (I'd go Panko but only had Italian)
- 1 Egg
- 1 tsp Pepper
- 1 tsp Old Bay seasoning
- 2 TBS Olive Oil
- Bread of choice (I had wheat)
- Cheese of choice (if desired, I threw on provolone)

**Aioli** (Penney's fancy words not mine):

- Blue cheese dressing
- Dijon mustard
- Mayonnaise

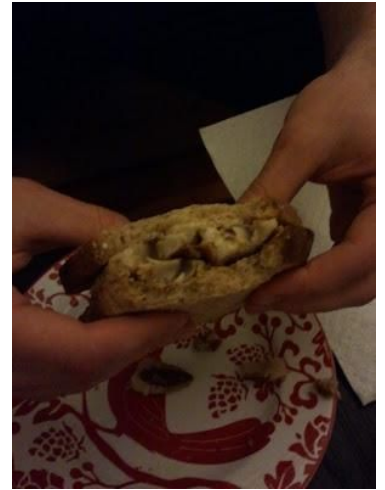
### Loose directions

Pre-heat the olive oil in a pan over medium heat. Coat the thawed and dried whitefish in the beaten egg, then coat with a mixture of bread crumbs, pepper, and Old Bay. Once coated drop in the pan with the olive oil. Cook about 3-4 minutes each side depending on thickness.

For the aioli/sauce, mix a desired mixture of the blue cheese, Dijon mustard, and mayo. I like things on the spicier side so I went heavier on the mustard. If you want tangy, maybe use more of the blue cheese or mayo.

Toast the bread lightly before adding the fish. Throw on a cheese if you want. Cover with desired amount of aioli/sauce/. Enjoy.

– posted by Bryan



## Saffron Seafood Risotto

Some days the best part of work is thinking about what I'm making for dinner. My handsome hubby hunted down a few recipes for the week and I was looking forward to this one.

But don't be fooled; risotto cannot be made in 18 minutes as the original recipe claimed – haha.

The results? Totally worth 40 minutes of stirring. One bottle of wine later, I present restaurant-worthy seafood risotto. Lactose and dairy free to boot!

### Ingredients

- 2 1/2 c. chicken broth
- 8 oz bottle clam juice
- 3 TBS salted butter
- 1 chopped shallot
- 2/3 cup arborio rice
- 1/8 tsp saffron threads, crushed
- 2 TBS lemon juice
- 1/2 cup chopped tomatoes or red bell peppers
- 16 oz shrimp, peeled and deveined
- 8 oz bay scallops
- Chopped parsley



### Directions

1. Bring broth and clam juice to a simmer. Do not boil. Keep warm.
2. In a separate saucepan, melt 2 TBS butter. Add shallots and cook 2 minutes or until tender.
3. Add rice and saffron. Cook 1 min. Add lemon juice, stir for 15 seconds.
4. Stir in warm broth mixture in 1/2 cup increments, stirring until liquid is almost absorbed before adding more. Stir slowly and constantly, scrapping the bottom of the pan. This will take 35-45 minutes. So drink liberally and enjoy some 90's pop music.
5. Stir in tomatoes and/or bell peppers. Heat for 1 min.
6. Add shrimp and scallops. Stir. Cover 4 minutes. Remove lid and stir, cook until done.
7. Sprinkle with parsley and a squeeze of lemon juice. Eat it all in one sitting.



As for using whiskey stones to cool down white wine? Pass on this experiment. It made the wine taste freezer burned and off-key. Like a classy broad, I prefer ice cubes when I haven't been patient enough to let the wine chill.

Wine: Tiamo Pinot Grigio, Venezia DOC, 2013.

## Salmon with Roasted Bell Peppers and Lemon Slices

Easy summer supers: A girl can only eat so much lettuce and call it satisfying, but there's no way I'm leaving the oven on for longer than necessary. Enter fast salmon with roasted red peppers. Thank you, Turkish and Mediterranean recipes!

### Ingredients

- 4 salmon fillets
- 1 onion, halved and thinly sliced
- 2 bell peppers, sliced (red and orange look best)
- 4 slices of lemon
- 2 TBS olive oil
- Salt and ground black pepper to taste
- 1 c plain Greek yogurt
- 2 tsp dried dill
- Juice of 1 lemon

1. Preheat the oven to 350F.

2. In a heavy pan, heat the olive oil. Stir in the onions and red peppers and cook until soft (for about 5 minutes). Season with salt and pepper and leave to cool.

3. Spread the foil (that is large enough to enclose all the fish) on a baking tray and place defrosted salmon fillets on it. Spread the sautéed onions and red peppers on the fillets evenly. Place a slice or two of lemon on each fillet, season with salt and ground black pepper. Wrap the foil to make into a packet by pulling up the sides and pinching the edges tightly, leaving a little room for the steam to escape. Place the tray in the preheated oven for about 20-25 minutes.

4. While salmon cooks, whisk yogurt, dill, lemon juice, salt and pepper together in a small bowl.

5. Once cooked, open up the packet, and serve the salmon hot with the onion, red pepper and lemon garnish. Top with a generous dollop of Greek yogurt sauce. We served it with steamed broccoli and jasmine rice.

Serves 2-4 | Preparation time: 15 minutes | Cooking time: 25-30 minutes



## Coconut Curry Salmon

After rocking out a bear-sized portion of epic BBQ at the famous Salt Lick BBQ, I wanted some fish this week as a counterbalance. Who would have guessed that Kraft would have a great recipe for coconut curry salmon? Of course, my revisions excluded the one Kraft ingredient, but I give them kudos for inspiration.

This took maybe 25 minutes to prepare, resulting in full flavors that belied the quickness of the dish. We gave it 2 thumbs up and decided it's a keeper recipe!

### Ingredients

- 1 can (13.5 oz.) regular or lite coconut milk
- 1 tsp ground cumin
- 1 tsp crushed red pepper flakes
- 3 tsp curry powder, divided – I used yellow but red or green would work too
- 4 salmon fillets (1 lb.), with skins
- Juice from 2 limes
- 2 tsp oil
- 1 bell pepper, cut into strips
- 3 plum tomatoes, seeded and chopped OR 1 can diced tomatoes
- 1 onion, cut lengthwise in half, then sliced crosswise
- 2 TBS chopped fresh cilantro
- Salt and Pepper to taste
- Extra lime for garnish

### Directions

1. Heat oven to 375°F. If you're making rice, start that now. **TIP:** For extra oomph, add a touch of coconut milk, salt and some sugar to the rice before it cooks.
2. Blend the coconut milk, cumin, red pepper flakes, 1/2 tsp salt and 2 tsp curry powder with immersion blender until smooth. Set aside.
3. Place the fish, skin-sides down, on a baking sheet sprayed with cooking spray. Mix lime juice and 1 tsp curry powder; brush onto fish. BAKE 8 to 10 min. or until fish flakes easily with fork.
4. Meanwhile, heat oil in large skillet on medium heat. Add the bell peppers, tomatoes and onions; cook 5 minutes. Stir in coconut milk mixture, then taste and season per preferences. We added more heat and curry powder and lime juice at this stage. Cook 5 minutes or until heated through, stirring frequently. Stir in cilantro.

Serve the salmon with sauce and jasmine rice. Sprinkle with cilantro and an additional squeeze of lime juice.

## Bangladeshi Pumpkin and Shrimp

As I've mentioned before, my book club pairs food themes with our reading materials. For October, we read Max Brooks' World War Z in honor of Halloween, and since it's an international tale, our gracious hostess made a plethora of Bangladeshi food. This pumpkin and shrimp dish was everyone's favorite and we begged for the recipe.

TIP from the hostess and chef: "I am not good at measuring or using recipes. I always just call my mom when I am in doubt."

### Ingredients

- 1/2 Pumpkin, cut into slices or large cubes (find it in H-mart or any Asian store), seeded
- 1-2 lbs uncooked Shrimp
- 3 TBS Vegetable oil
- 1/2 tsp Turmeric powder
- 1/2 tsp Red chili powder
- 1 tsp Cumin seed paste
- 1 tsp Ginger paste
- 1 tsp Garlic paste
- 1 onion, chopped
- 1/2 tsp Sugar
- Salt
- Water

### Directions

1. Saute the shrimps in oil in the same pan, then add onion, garlic, ginger and cumin. Stir thoroughly. Then add turmeric powder, chili powder and salt and sugar stir continuously.
2. Pour in 1 cup of water and bring it to a boil. Add sliced pumpkin and cook on high heat for 20 minutes.
3. Stir everything and put a lid on the pot. Keep cooking for another 5-10 minutes on low heat. Test with a fork to see if pumpkin is soft if it is then it is done. There shouldn't be much water left.
4. Garnish with fresh cilantro and green chillies. Serve over steaming saffron rice.



## Salmon with Honey-Mustard Pan Sauce

Trader Joe's, you make my heart sing with your easy dinners and bright flavors. Your convenience is worth a few extra dollars and your frozen Indian food is heralded across the skies.

Ahem, right. This is a straight-up copy of the recipe on the package of TJ's Silver Brite Salmon. We've eaten it twice in two weeks. Do it and be happy.

### Ingredients

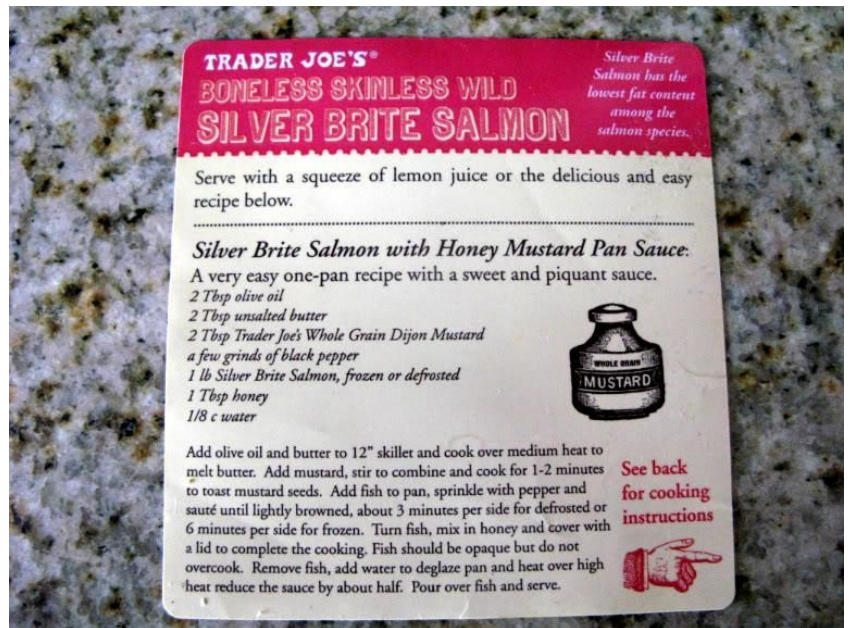
- 1.5 pounds thawed salmon, cut into equal pieces
- 4 TBS+ butter, divided (I prefer salted butter)
- 2 TBS whole grain dijon mustard
- 4+ TBS honey, divided
- 1/4 cup water
- 1 TBS olive oil
- black pepper and salt to taste

### Directions

1. Add olive oil and 2 TBS butter to a nonstick skillet and cook over medium heat to melt butter. Add mustard and stir to combine. Cook for 1 – 2 minutes to toast mustard seeds. Add 2 TBS honey to pan until just melted.
2. Drop in salmon pieces skin side down, then salt and pepper the flesh liberally. Cover with a lid to complete the cooking, about 6 minutes. Fish should be opaque, but do not overcook. Remove fish and set aside, keeping it warm.
3. Add water to deglaze pan, then add the remaining 2 TBS of butter and 2 TBS of honey. Heat over high heat until the sauce thickens and reduces by about half.
4. Return fish to pan for a minute, spooning sauce over the pieces. Serve!

We've enjoyed the salmon over field greens, with quinoa, alongside roasted broccoli and brussel sprouts. Something green makes the dish prettier.

TIP: you'll want to pour any remaining sauce over pretty much anything on your plate.



## Homemade Smoked Salmon

With the summer smoking season half way through, I thought it was a good time for another guest blog post on my latest adventure — this time about delicious, low, slow cooking. After diving into the world of pork and beef products it was time to change things up and try my hand at smoking fish. The first type of fish that naturally came to mind was salmon; I could already taste the briny, salty goodness melting in my mouth on a bagel with tangy capers and smooth cream cheese.

Since acquiring my smoker I've had hesitations about smoking fish. Not because I don't enjoy it, quite the contrary. It was the temperature of the smoking that worried me; fish needs to be smoked at a much lower temperature than pork or beef products (almost 100 degrees less in some cases). I was concerned that my smoker would just get too hot and I've have trouble maintaining such a low temperature. Also, the fact that my rudimentary smoker's temperature is devoid of numerical values, and uses a "Warm, Ideal, Hot" for its descriptive system can be a bit tricky. I settled on the notion that 140 degrees (the temperature required to smoke salmon) was in the "Warm" range.



### BRINING

Now with most smoking ventures, there is a multistage preparation process that usually involves day. For smoking fish, this is the brining step. I didn't want to overcomplicate things so I found one of the easiest brines to make. Simply combine the following ingredients in a large mixing bowl or container of your choice:

- 4 cups water
- 1/4 cup kosher salt
- 1/4 cup brown sugar
- 2 bay leaves
- 1 stalk sliced celery
- 1/2 cup chopped fennel
- 1/2 chopped onion
- 2 smashed garlic cloves

After these are mixed well, place your salmon pieces into the bowl, cover and refrigerate. I've read that there is no specific amount of time you need to brine, but the thicker the cut of fish, the longer you will want to brine. I was dealing with some fairly hearty cuts of salmon so I brined it overnight for a total of 12-14 hours (can't remember exactly).

### DRYING

Once the brining is complete it is important to dry out the fish. This is done by placing the fish on a rack, plate, or other item and letting it sit in a cool room for 2-3 hours. The desired room temperature is apparently 65 degrees but if you don't want to run up a giant electric bill, just run a fan over the salmon in an air-conditioned room to help keep the room cooler. It was also critical to close the door of the room where I was drying the fish, or else our cat would have had a feast of epic proportions (so mind those pets!).

### SMOKING

After the drying out process you are ready to smoke. I got my charcoal going and chose to use a combination of apple and hickory wood chips. I read that both, among others, are good for smoking fish, so I figured why not get a little crazy

and see what happens? Once the smoker was ready, I placed the cuts of salmon on there and by some beginner's luck, was able to keep the temperature low enough to not overcook the fish. Smoking times will vary depending on the size and type of fish but it actually only took a little over an hour for these guys to cook to perfection. The tell is that the salmon will easily flake off, as a good smoked fish should.

## EATING

I served the salmon to a small group of people. We lathered up some pumpernickel bread with cream cheese, the salmon, and some capers and went to town. The first attempt in smoking something new has tended to be a hit or miss venture with me, but this one was a direct hit. Everyone thoroughly enjoyed it and I've already done it a second time with equally good results. The second round is pictured here.

Enjoy!

Guest Post Blogger Bryan



## Citrus-Salsa Salmon

### If I Had a Personal Chef

Yesterday was a long day. I got to work early, stayed late. I ran interference, demurred, cajoled, led, prompted, sighed and try to align the hours in the day to the ever increasing to-do list. Gym plans? Nixed. Getting home with daylight remaining? Nope. Calling my friend back for a leisurely catch up? Not even.

For one reason or another, I haven't walked in the door until nearly 8pm every night this week. Which means I'm hungry, cranky and tired. And last night it was my turn to cook. Normally I'd round up a cart full of groceries earlier in the week and be down to the creative recipes by Thursday night, but we're leaving town today for 4 days and who wants to come home to a \$5 bag of organic lettuce turned to slime? Our cabinets contained ramen noodles, butternut squash sauce, goat cheese and a lemon.



Solution: Whole Foods. Yes, I am aware of the backlash regarding their high prices, the touted elitism of shopping in their stores, and the exacerbation of racial and class disparities their stores highlight. But I am a single, professional adult living with another single, professional adult (Hello DINK) and I choose where to spend my money. And their food tastes good.

I wanted something easy and healthy, and settled on a menu of:

- sautéed asparagus with garlic, salt and lemon juice
- 90-second Brown rice quinoa blend
- \$5.99 bottle of white wine that was not memorable but very drinkable
- Fistful of chocolate chips (Okay, I already had these at home)

Citrus-Salsa Salmon:

- 4 (3-ounce) fillets skin-on, farm-raised salmon
- 1 1/2 teaspoon extra-virgin olive oil
- 1/2 teaspoon fine sea salt
- 1/2 cup 365 Everyday Value® Roasted Salsa Verde
- 1 grapefruit, peel and pith removed, cut into segments
- 1 tangerine or mandarin orange, peel and pith removed, cut into segments

Preheat the oven to 400°F. Arrange salmon skin-side down on a parchment-paper-lined baking sheet. Brush all over with oil and season with salt. In a medium bowl, combine salsa, grapefruit and tangerine, spoon evenly over salmon and bake until just cooked through, about 10 minutes.

Within 20 minutes, the food was cooked and plated and I was plopped on the couch, just in time for me to get it on with Grey's Anatomy and Private Practice. Which brings me to my point: sometimes I wish I had a private chef.

# Soup

- 30-minute Broccoli Cheese Soup
- Easy Spicy Pumpkin Soup
- Epic, time-consuming, totally worth-it Vegetarian Chili
- Curried Butternut Squash Soup with Quinoa
- Avgolemono (Greek egg lemon) Soup
- Easy Garlic and Egg Soup
- Doro Wat – Ethiopian Spicy Chicken Stew
- Chicken Sausage & Bean Stew
- Gazpacho-esque Soup
- 10-Minute Southwest Veggie Soup

## Easy 30-minute Broccoli Cheese Soup

Mid-November. I woke up yesterday to a broken heater and a balmy 59 degree apartment. After calling, emailing and leaving a voicemail for the maintenance service, I curled up in sweats next to a space heater and the cat.

I normally wouldn't get near this much dairy but my HUSBAND of one week (we got married!) mentioned a hankering for broccoli-cheese soup. I swallowed several Lactaid pills and we went to work.

This is a good recipe: solid, 30-minute, one pot comfort food. Serve with crusty bread for sopping. The base recipe was [Cooking Light's](#), but as we all know, you always add more cheese.



### Ingredients

- Cooking spray
- 1 TB olive oil
- 1 chopped onion
- 3 garlic cloves, minced
- 3 cups chicken broth
- 1/2 bottle non-stout beer – we used Anchorsteam
- 1 (16-oz) package frozen broccoli florets
- 1/2 cup grated spicy cheese (chipotle, pepper jack, etc.)
- 2 1/2 cups 2% reduced-fat milk
- 1/3 cup all-purpose flour
- 3 TBS Worcestershire sauce
- 1 tsp + black pepper
- salt to taste
- 10 oz processed cheese, cubed (such as Velveeta)

### Directions

Heat a large nonstick saucepan coated with olive oil and cooking spray over medium-high heat. Add onion and garlic; sauté 3 minutes or until tender. Add broth and frozen broccoli. Bring broccoli mixture to a boil over medium-high heat. Add beer and Worcestershire sauce. Reduce heat to medium; cook 10 minutes.

Separately, combine milk and flour, stirring with a whisk until well blended. Add milk mixture to broccoli mixture. Cook 5 minutes or until slightly thick, stirring constantly. Stir in pepper, salt and spicy cheese.

Remove from heat; add Velveeta cheese, stirring until cheese melts. Optional: use immersion blender for 20-30 seconds to smooth out portions while leaving most of the broccoli florets whole.

Eat with glee! Pairs well with beer.



## Fast Spicy-Coconut Curry Pumpkin Soup

It's no secret that one of my life goals is to promote pumpkin as more than a seasonal fall food. Pumpkin is so undervalued in savory foods and baking! While I continue as pumpkin ambassador, here's an easy pumpkin soup recipe to warm your cold anti-pumpkin soul.

### INGREDIENTS

- 30 oz. (2 cans) pumpkin puree
- 1 onion, diced
- 2 TBS olive oil
- 1 can light coconut milk
- 1 can regular coconut milk
- 1 TBS red curry paste
- 2 TBS curry powder
- 1 cup vegetable or chicken broth
- 1 tsp kosher salt
- 2 tsp red pepper flakes (more or less according to desired spice level)



### DIRECTIONS:

1. Add onion and olive oil to large pot. Saute until onions are soft and translucent.
2. Add everything else to a pot and heat on medium low until warm. (Do not boil)
3. Using immersion or regular blender, whip until desired consistency. Taste and adjust heat and salt.

For an extra prettiness factor, top with a swirl of coconut milk, a shake of red pepper and a few toasted pinenuts or pumpkin seeds.

[Modified from the Nutmeg Nanny recipe](#)

## Epic Vegetarian Chili

This is no ordinary, ho-hum watery veggie bean chili. This recipe is smoky, complex, rich in flavor and texture. We made this for a pumpkin party and everyone RAVED, then asked for the recipe and for seconds.

I'm on day 3 of leftovers and am still happy to eat this. I recommend serving it with Pumpkin Cornbread and all of the garnishes your heart desires. Really, *make this chili*.

### INGREDIENTS

- 2 cans dark kidney beans
- 2 cans pinto beans
- 1/2 cup extra-virgin olive oil
- 24 cloves garlic, minced (I totally used the pre-minced stuff in a jar)
- 1 can chipotle chiles in adobo sauce (Chop all the chiles except for 3. Reserve the adobo sauce for extra heat if desired.)
- 4 bay leaves
- 1 large white onion, chopped
- 1 large red onion, chopped
- 1-2 jalapenos, minced
- 16 oz. button mushrooms, quartered
- 12 medium tomatoes, chopped
- 2 cans canned hominy, drained
- 1 cup tomato paste
- 4 TBS. red wine vinegar
- 4 tsp. fresh thyme leaves
- 2 tsp. dried oregano
- 3 tsp. ground cumin
- 1/2 tsp. chili powder
- 1 package sun-dried tomatoes, chopped
- Freshly ground black pepper, to taste
- Kosher salt, to taste
- Sour cream, to garnish
- Minced cilantro, to garnish
- Minced red onion, to garnish
- Queso fresco, to garnish – Any cheese will work, but this salty, semi-firm option crumbles nicely and looks pretty against the dark colors of the beans and tomatoes.



### INSTRUCTIONS

1. Put kidney beans and pinto beans into a large pot and cover with 3" water; bring to a boil, reduce heat to medium-low, and simmer, stirring occasionally, until beans are tender, about 45 minutes. Set pot aside.
2. Heat oil in a VERY large pot over medium-high heat. Add garlic, chipotle chiles, bay leaves, onions, and jalapenos and cook, stirring often, until onions are golden, 12–15 minutes. This smells awesome.
3. Add mushrooms and cook, stirring often, until tender, about 8 minutes. Add tomatoes and cook, stirring, about 5 minutes. Stir in reserved beans and their cooking liquid, stir to combine.

4. Add the hominy, tomato paste, vinegar, thyme, oregano, cumin, chili powder, sun-dried tomatoes, and season with salt and pepper. Reduce heat to medium-low and simmer, stirring occasionally, until chili thickens and flavors meld, about 1 hour. Turn off the heat to help thicken, and/or add more tomato paste.
5. Serve chili topped with sour cream, cilantro, queso fresco and red onions. Prepare for double helpings – and filling tupperwares!

The recipe serves 12-15. [It can be halved, as in the original version from from Saveur.](#)

## Comfort in a Bowl: Avgolemono Soup

Avgolemono literally means ‘egg lemon’ in Greek. I don’t remember what inspired sampling this soup at a nearby Greek diner, but I was instantly hooked. Don’t let the idea of eggs in soup turn you off; this is 180 degrees different from egg drop soup.

This week I made a jumbo pot of it, consuming 3 bowls without blinking an eye – and am happy as a clam. It’s like the Greek version of chicken ‘n dumplings. Best of all, for all the smooth creaminess you taste, it’s lactose free!

- 8 cups (2 quarts) chicken broth – vegetable broth would work too
- 1 cup orzo (or long grain rice, but I prefer how orzo feels in my mouth)
- 4 large eggs
- 10 TBS fresh lemon juice (about 3 lemons)
- 1 TBS grated lemon zest – or the zest of about 3 lemons
- Salt and freshly ground pepper, to taste
- Fresh dill, slightly chopped

1. In a large saucepan, bring chicken broth to a boil. Add orzo; cover, reduce heat and simmer 10 minutes, or until orzo is al dente. (If using rice, add another cup of chicken broth. Simmer until grains are tender.) Do not drain; set aside.

2. In a bowl, squeeze lemon juice and zest. Add eggs and whisk until foamy and a bit thick. Gradually add 1/2 cup hot broth from saucepan, whisking constantly. Add two more 1/2 cups of broth, whisking after each addition. Whisk until froth increases and the color looks like light lemon or butter cream. (The orzo should stay in the saucepan with some of the broth).

3. Pour egg mixture back into saucepan and reheat, *stirring with a wooden spoon*, until egg cooks and soup slightly thickens. **Do not boil**, or eggs will curdle. The froth will remain on top but settle out as time passes. Add salt and pepper to taste. Ladle into bowls and top with dill sprig. Serve hot or cold.

As for a wine pairing, I enjoyed a 2009 Vidonya, a Vinho Verde from Portugal apparently. Light and crisp, but not acidic or sweet. (The picture makes the wine look dark as it’s on top of my dark coffee table). I [adapted the recipe from Oprah](#).

This recipe serves 8, but can be halved successfully.



## No-Fuss Garlic and Egg Soup

February is my least favorite month. It's cold and dark, my skin gets all flaky and my hair falls limp. I'm tired of all the usual foods I enjoy making and start skipping the gym on a regular basis. In short, it's a blah month. Thankfully it's also a short month. And I own flannel sheets, which make everything more bearable.

Last night I jumped on the soup bandwagon and made this Spanish Garlic & Egg Soup, courtesy of [The Domestic Diva](#). I don't know what makes it "Spanish," so I'm just gonna call it garlic and egg soup. It doesn't look like much but was simple and flavorful, made with at-hand ingredients. It's going in the repeat recipe list for sure. Here's my version:

### Ingredients

- 3 TBS olive oil
- 4-6 cloves garlic, roughly chopped
- 1 TBS fresh rosemary, finely minced – or ½ TBS dried
- 4 cups broth or stock (chicken or vegetable)
- ½ tsp paprika (Smoked paprika is recommended but I didn't have any)
- ½ tsp dried oregano
- 1 tsp+ sea salt (to taste)
- 1/2 tsp black pepper (to taste)
- 4 eggs
- 1 package of precooked meatballs (used Aidell's Teriyaki Pineapple chicken meatballs) or other protein



### Instructions

In a medium sized pot, heat the oil. Add the chopped garlic, rosemary, and a pinch of salt. Sauté for 1-2 minutes until the garlic just begins to brown. This smells like heaven.

Add the stock right away, followed by paprika, oregano, pepper and 1 tsp salt. Bring to a low simmer over medium heat, turn to low. If using protein, add it now (cook it before adding). Simmer for 10 minutes. Taste and add more salt — especially if you used a reduced sodium broth.

Crack the eggs one at a time into a small bowl and lower the bowl into the pot to gently slide the egg into the the barely simmering soup. Repeat with each egg. Cover, and cook about 4 minutes for soft yolks, 6 minutes for hard. My anti-runny eggs bf went with a 10-minute cooked egg and was happy with the firmness.

Here's Alton Brown's quick rundown of the basics of egg poaching:

1. Heat the water: Add enough water to come 1 inch up the side of a narrow, deep 2-quart saucier. Add 1 teaspoon kosher salt and 2 teaspoons white vinegar and bring to a simmer over medium heat. Meanwhile, crack 1 very fresh cold large egg into a custard cup or small ramekin. Use the handle of a spatula or spoon to quickly stir the water in one direction until it's all smoothly spinning around.
2. Use this whirlpool method when poaching a single serving (one or two eggs). For bigger batches, heat the water, salt and vinegar in a 12-inch nonstick skillet and do not stir.
3. Add the egg: Carefully drop the egg into the center of the whirlpool. The swirling water will help prevent the white from "feathering," or spreading out in the pan.

4. Let it poach: Turn off the heat, cover the pan and set your timer for 5 minutes. Don't peek, poke, stir or accost the egg in any way.

5. Lift it out: Remove the egg with a slotted spoon and serve immediately. Alternatively, move the egg to an ice bath and refrigerate up to 8 hours. Reheat in warm water just before serving.

Returning to the Soup-

Ladle soup into bowls, spooning out the eggs first so they don't break. Serve with bread for sopping.

Chopping included, this recipe took maybe 30 minutes start to finish. Though it says it'll serve 2-4, what it really means is 2 people can finish it in one sitting if it's the main course. It was and we did.

Next time I'll experiment with tossing in fresh spinach, using rotisserie chicken and maybe a bit more heat. Roasted garlic smeared on hot bread would complement the flavors well too.

Dammit, now I want bread and butter.

## Doro Wat – Spicy Ethiopian Chicken Stew

As a proud voter on election day, what could be more patriotic than sharing a recipe that celebrates our historical melting pot through food? I hosted November book club, selecting Ethiopian food based on our book of choice: *Cutting for Stone* by Abraham Verghese, in which Ethiopia is a prime location for much of the tale. And, like much of America, Ethiopians in the U.S. are split in their vote between Romney and Obama.

Doro Wat is a traditional Ethiopian dish – a spicy chicken stew. This recipe enjoys the convenience of a crockpot for a dish that can be created easily and celebrated on both sides of the aisle.

### Ingredients

- 1 (14.5-ounce) can diced tomatoes with diced green chiles, undrained
- 2 pounds boneless, skinless chicken thighs
- 1/3 cup fresh lemon juice
- 2 TBS butter
- 2 large onions, diced
- 1 TBS minced garlic
- 1 tsp fresh, ground ginger
- 1 ½ tsp paprika
- 1 tsp chili powder
- 1/2 tsp black pepper
- 1 tsp yellow curry powder
- 1 tsp ground turmeric
- ¼ cup brewed coffee
- 1 1/2 cups water
- 8 hard-boiled eggs (peeled, to add later)



Don't be intimidated by this list of ingredients. I sat down to make the grocery list with a groan, and was pleasantly surprised to realize I only needed to purchase chicken, onions and turmeric. The other spices are part of most pantries and are all easy to find at regular grocery stores. Also, fresh ginger root keeps in the freezer for months – grate it while frozen and just pop the leftover root in a ziplock back in the freezer.

### Directions

1. Pull out your crock pot, plug it in and empty the tomatoes can into your cooker.
2. Place in the chicken thighs, layering as needed. Add the lemon juice, coffee, butter, diced onion, and all of the spices.
3. Pour in the water and stir the spices to eliminated clumps.
4. Cover and cook on low for 6 to 8 hours, or high for 4 to 5. I went with 4.5 hours on high. The soup is ready when the onions are soft and translucent and the chicken is cooked through and beginning to fall apart.
5. Ladle into a wide-mouth bowl and place a whole hard-boiled egg into each dish. Serve with injera (Ethiopian bread) and lots of dry, red wine.

### Reviews

Book club ladies and the boyfriend offered the following reviews:

- "It's savory, with a bit of spice."
- "Yummy, unique flavors that warm you up."
- "Robust flavor."

- “You can taste the onion, but in a good way.”
- “It seems so simple to make. A great use for chicken thighs which are always cheaper than breasts.”

I’ll definitely cook this stew again, and will try my hand at making – rather than buying – injera. I also attempted this side dish of mesir wat for book club, but without much success. Which means there’s always a new cooking challenge!

Adapted from [A Year of Slow Cooking](#)



## First Fall Soup: Chicken Sausage 'n Bean

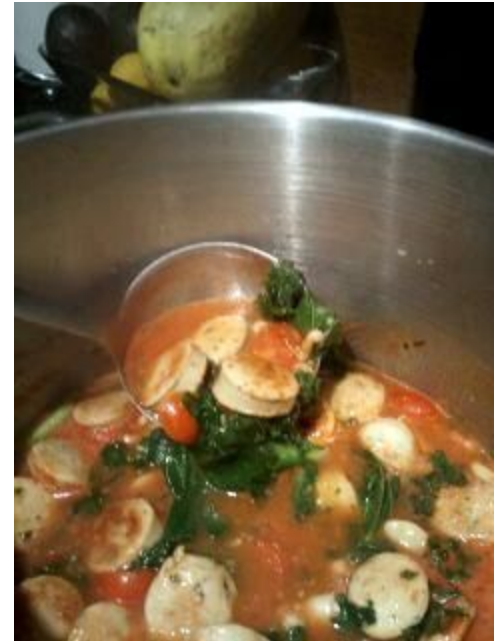
For no particular reason I couldn't get to sleep last night. I futzed around, watching SVU reruns on TV, replying to emails from people, thinking about my Austria trip on the horizon, and tossing a foil ball up and down the hallway to my cat's delight. I think I finally tucked in around 1am — which explains why my productivity and energy took a nosedive.

To salvage what's left of my alert brain, I present my first fall soup recipe: chicken sausage, beans and kale. It's quick, it's easy, it's healthy and surprisingly flavorful. The recipe is adapted from an old Real Simple recipe. Aside: I like Real Simple in general, but often find their recipes bland — they're too simple. Fortunately, this soup is an exception.

### What You'll Need:

- 2 cans of beans, any kind, drained — I used butter and white beans this time
- 13 oz package of precooked sausage, cut into 1/4" pieces — I favor Al Fresco chicken sausages
- 16 oz vegetable or chicken broth
- 1 can stewed tomatoes or tomato sauce — If using tomato sauce, you may want to toss in a few halved cherry or grape tomatoes for texture
- 2 cups + kale, roughly chopped or torn
- 2 tsp dried basil
- 2 cloves garlic
- 1 TBS olive oil
- salt and pepper to taste
- Parmesan cheese (optional)

1. Heat oil in soup pot over medium-low. Add the cut sausage and brown them without moving the pieces, 3-4 minutes. Resist the urge to stir! I only halfway succeeded.



2. Flip the sausage pieces and allow other side to brown a bit. Add the garlic. Now you can stir to your heart's content.

3. Add the beans, broth, tomatoes and basil to the pot, stirring to combine. Increase the heat to medium and bring the contents to a simmer. Once simmering, add the chopped kale and stir it in, allowing the leaves to wilt for 3-5 minutes. (I poke the leaves down into the broth to speed up this process. A patient chef I am not.)

4. You're done! Ladle the soup into bowls, top with a sprinkling of Parmesan cheese and serve with a side of crusty bread or crunchy crackers. Mmmm...warm flavors and colors of fall. And it's ready in ~20 minutes.

I made this on a Sunday night and had 4 lunch-sized tupperwares of leftovers — after eating probably 2 servings for dinner. This reheats well too — just be wary of the garlic!

## Gazpacho-esque Soup

I'm not entirely certain what constitutes "gazpacho," and the internet is full of dissenting opinions. But the chilled tomato-based soup I made with friends last night was so freaking good – who cares what it's called? It's dairy free, gluten-free, raw, vegan happy and oh-so-satisfying!

- 12 vine-ripened tomatoes (we used 22 home-grown Roma tomatoes), seeded
- 1 bunch cilantro, chopped (yes, the entire bunch)
- 1/2+ jalapeno, seeded and minced
- 3 bell peppers, seeded and cut into chunks (we used stoplight colors, but yellow and red would be lovely)
- 1/2 cup white wine vinegar
- 1 onion, peeled and cut thick
- 1 TBS olive oil
- 1 TBS minced garlic, or to taste
- 2 TBS freshly grated ginger
- salt and pepper

The instructions couldn't be easier:

Combine everything except the salt and pepper into a large bowl. Toss the ingredients together. Using a blender or food processor, blend in batches until pureed. (They're stupid expensive, but Vitamix blenders last for 30 years!) Combine the batches, then salt and pepper to taste. Chill for at least 30 minutes. Garnish with fresh cilantro and avocado.

Zesty, tangy and smooth – I recommend serving it with rustic bread as you're gonna wanna sop this up. You can also add seafood for a complete meal. As for wine, we enjoyed a chilled red sangria that was surprisingly smooth.

Adapted from [Quick Cooking with Pacific Flavors](#).

## 10 minute southwest veggie soup

I want to eat more vegetables. I try to eat more vegetables.

And I love meat. I need protein with every meal or I'm looking for cookies an hour after dinner. This weekend I wanted a meal, fast, and ended up with this tasty soup.

Cumin is clutch

- 2 cups Black Bean Soup (either pureed or not)
- 1 – 8 oz. can yellow corn, in water
- 1 -15 oz. stewed tomatoes (Italian or other flavored style)
- 1/2 bag frozen diced peppers
- 1 tsp. garlic powder
- 1 tsp. cumin
- 1 dash of paprika



Drain 75% of the liquid from the can of stewed tomatoes. Combine all ingredients in one pot over medium-low heat. Bring to a simmer for 5 minutes, stirring occasionally. I served it over 90-second brown rice, and would recommend a dollop of plain yogurt or sour cream on top too.

## Activities

- Cinnamon Ornaments
- DIY Sparkle Gold Shoes
- DIY Lantern Fail
- DIY Earring Organizer

## Holiday Activity: DIY Cinnamon Ornaments

I'm fortunate to have several friends with toddlers who enjoy crafting. The daughter of an art teacher, I get a kick out of helping kids use their hands to create something original and full of pride. I remember how much fun it was to paint a ceramic in elementary school then proudly present the mottled heart box to dad for Father's Day, and to get sticky fingers and glitter everywhere making glitter pinecones for holiday presents.

Using Pinterest as an inspiration and thinking about kid-friendliness, I rustled up the materials for DIY cinnamon ornaments. Crafting doesn't have to be expensive, and simpler is better — (I mean, do you remember my failed DIY Tin Lantern?) So I figured it doesn't get much easier than a two-ingredient recipe from McCormick for cinnamon ornaments.

Before you endeavor on this little baked craft adventure, a few tips to keep in mind:

- Toddlers like to eat things that look like cookie dough. Toddler review: "It tastes fpatsey." Me: "Fartsy? It tastes like farts?!" Mother Translation: "He says it tastes spicy." Ah.
- One batch made about 12 ornaments. The attention span of these lovely 3.5 year old kids was about one ornament per child. I got an extra 30 seconds if we drew the letter of their first name.
- These are not fix 'n forget items. They bake for 2.5 hours.
- Use the plastic wrap as stated and roll the dough 1/3 to 1/2 inch thick. I made some too thin that they were brittle and snapped.
- The holes you make for stringing through ribbon will shrink. Use a big straw, or 2 holes next to each other.
- Unlike sugar cookies, if you put these on the cookie sheet with a crack in the dough, the crack will not fuse. Keep the dough wet-ish by adding more applesauce.
- Accustomed to decorating sugar cookies, I found the plain surfaces dull and attempted to add some decorations via toothpick drawings. You should pass on this. Plain is perfect.
- Find cookie cutters before you start. Unless you like circles from glasses in various shapes, in which case, make sure you have very clean edges.

For the record, these turned out mostly fine. Not awesome, and also not bad for a first attempt. All's well that ends well. Definitely worth an easy \$8 and some crafting. And I think my mom will like a homemade present from one of her little girls.

## Activity: DIY Gold Sparkle Shoes

*“Successful women can still have their feet on the ground. They just wear better shoes.” – Maud van De Venne*

Thanks to multiple Pinterest posts – including this delightful one which involves mimosas – I decided to refresh a pair of scuffed up shoes with a little DIY sparkle.

These shoes are supposed to be copper but had faded to a brown-grey in the worn places. Yet the heels were still in good shape and I walk well in them, which is not a given. (I actually have nightmares about wearing horrible heels while racing to catch a plane) I also just wasn't ready to donate them yet.

### Supplies:

- About 1/2 cup Mod Podge
- A cheap sponge paint brush
- About 2 ounces of gold glitter
- Disposable container
- Something to protect the table – I cut open a couple plastic bags and taped 'em down.

The directions are simple:

1. Mix half the amounts of glitter and half the Mod Podge in that container you won't mind throwing away. Stay on the lighter side of glitter: glue ratio. If you add too much glitter to the Mod Podge, it can clump up awkwardly when you try to paint it onto the surface of the shoe. Think thin layers. You can always paint more! If you're new to the power of Mod Podge, don't worry about the white color; it dries clear.



2. Paint one layer on both shoes. Allow to dry at least overnight, or until very dry. If you paint a new coat over a wet one, your glitter globs will increase. (You can see my globs starting to appear even after one coat.)

Tip: To keep the mix from drying out between coats, I put a ziplock over the Solo cup, then just stirred and started right back up. The \$1 spent on three brushes meant I wasn't too

you  
each

3. paint-dry-paint-dry until you're satisfied with the saturation and distribution of glitter. I completed 2 full layers touch-ups.

4. Ta da! Wear 'em with pride! The as I flex and walk.

My take: It's an easy DIY project on upcycle/ recycle a pair of shoes.



attached to tossing them. If you want to mix a new batch coat, go for it.

Continue to alternate satisfied with the This is totally personal and then a third round of

glitter stays on nicely, even

the cheap and I'm happy to

Downside? It definitely took more time than I anticipated, resulting in a table covered in glitter and plastic bags and shoes for about a week. Plus, glitter inevitably gets all over the place, so if you don't refer to it as "pixie dust" like I do, that might be annoying. Va va va vroom!



## DIY Tin Lantern Pinterest Fail

Thanks to Etsy and Pinterest, I'm starting to worry about hoarding items previously dubbed 'trash.' I hear a little voice in my head cry out, "No! Don't toss the empty coffee tin or mason jar; you could craft that into something marvelous!"

This weekend, bored by volleyball, I decided to make a gift for a friend.

Here are the inspirational photos and instructions. All it takes is hammering holes into a piece of thin metal. How hard could it be? This lovely photo is the goal for my finished product.

The site called for a thick nail or two (which I didn't have), clamps (which I also didn't have), a tin coffee can and hammer, plus some other stuff I dubbed extraneous.

I drew my design on paper and taped it to the can, thinking that an intricate pattern of waves and stars and vines, plus my friend's name would be perfect. I used a screw instead of a nail, which ended up cutting my thumb and forefinger, but what's a homemade gift without a little sweat right?



Turns out, they really do mean that clamps would be useful – you might even say clamps on a sturdy table are an imperative for this project. But who has an extra shed and workbench in these times? Not to be deterred, I improvised – using my feet as vice-like clamps while sitting on the floor:



The process of hold screw-hammer it-hit finger- suck finger-readjust feet-crack neck-decide I don't need THAT many holes-look for a better screw-try a tiny nail-return to screw-repeat – continued for oh, two hours. I was also sipping whiskey which may have contributed to the length of effort, but mostly I think it helped numb the finger pain and body cricks.

I pulled off the paper for a peek and realized:

- 1) not all the holes went through;
- 2) I needed more holes;
- 3) I should have painted the can before I started punching holes; and
- 4) damn, I wish I'd just bought a gift card instead.

By this point I'd cut my forefinger on the screw threads and depressed myself by dropping in a candle and only seeing measly dots of light. I decided to keep going. I nabbed a bottle of black acrylic paint and

dabbed it on the tin to hide the über shininess.

I re-wrapped and taped the paper around the dry tin, aligning it JUST SO. I punched old holes, added a few new ones, and realized that spelling out her name was pointless as it was illegible.

About this time I realized that the can was getting bent out of shape so I tried to bang out some bumps from the inside of the can. Highly ineffectual. Whatever. I popped a candle inside to see the beauty revealed. I proudly present my coffee can lantern:

To the untrained eye, this appears to be a beat up, slightly rusted tin can pulled from a dumpster. Not so! It's a labor of love! A gift from the heart! An upcycled, Eco-friendly home decoration!



Riiiiight. Pinterest fail. Apparently those who have gone before recommend using a power drill, and/or freezing water in the cans so they don't bend when hammered. Ah.

I've decided to give my friend the lantern...but I'll also toss in a gift card and a bottle of wine. Sorry, Kelly! It's the thought that counts sometimes.



## DIY Earring Organizer

I have a thing for Pinterest. It's a go-to happy place for me, AND I learn things. For instance, did you know that mixing equal parts Dawn dish soap and white vinegar makes the most effective bathtub cleaner ever? I was dubious but after stripping and recaulking my tub last weekend, it needed serious help. I sprayed the mixture on and literally saw 'stuff' melting and sliding down the tub – which was both gross and awesome.



My next weekend project involved organizing my earrings based on an inspiration from, you guessed it, Pinterest. Here was the post about decorative radiator covers that started it all.

The hardest part: "Using a snips, we cut the sheet metal down to size." Snips? What's a snips? A certain cutting process? A tool? I bought a \$3 pair of pliers/cutting things. A word to the wise: buy a snips, whatever it may be. I have blisters from using my crappy tool. And I nearly gave up before I realized bending the metal first made it easier to cut.

In terms of costs, I spent: \$6 on a wooden 11x14 frame from A.C. Moore, \$18 on the radiator cover from Home Depot, and \$3 on the aforementioned torturous \$3 cutting tool from the Dollar store. I also used some wrapping paper and spray adhesive I already had on hand, and hung it on 2 small nails I had in my toolbox.

**Total cost? \$27.** Not bad compared to basically the same item (but much less cool, obviously) listed for \$45 online.

I followed the directions in the post, which are basically: 1) cut metal to fit frame, 2) put in frame, and 3) hang earrings.

About 45 minutes and several poking cuts later, I was actually pretty impressed with myself.

Next time, a few things I'll do differently:

- Did I mention the pain in the ass of using my particular cutting tool? I'll buy a real metal cutter.
- Pick out a nicer frame. The price was budget friendly, but the wood is rougher than I expected and the corners pulled apart a bit.
- Use a flat-tip screwdriver to bend the edges of the radiator cover into the frame so it doesn't bulge out.
- Own a better camera, improve the lighting, or simply take better pictures to showcase how neat this really is.

Score one for functional DIY organizing!



## All Recipes

5 Minute 'Pickles'

Easy Breezy Tzatziki Dip

Thanksgiving Vegetarian Stuffing – maybe the best recipe EVER

Paneer-Avocado-Mango Salad

Beet & Goat Cheese Arugula Salad

Italian Tomato-Basil Tart

Grilled Cheese Perfection

Tangy Swiss Chard

Pickled Peaches

7-Minute Loaded Sweet Potato

Battle of the Brown Rice

Spicy Corn Dip

Copycat Starbucks Iced Lemon Poundcake

Copycat Red Lobster Cheesy Biscuits

DIY Pita Bread

“Holy Crap this is Good” Pumpkin Bread

Puff Pastry Breadsticks

Chocolate Chip Zucchini Bread

Breakfast “Cookies”

Pumpkin Cream Cheese Cinnamon Rolls

Mom’s Pumpkin Muffins

Frittata, the Lazy Man’s Eggs

Parfait, Donkey’s Favorite Food

Quiche ‘Muffins’

Bacon & Peanut Butter Sammy

- Winter White Cosmopolitan
- Summer Sangria
- Birthday Cake Martini
- Homemade Chai Tea
- Peach Fizz = Simplified Bellini
- Six Best Light Beers
- Perfect Bloody Mary Bar

- Angry Chicken (Arrabbiata)
- No Cook Main Meal: Chicken Caprese Salad
- Copycat Chick-Fil-A Honey Mustard Sauce – with Chicken
- Better-for-You Indian Butter Chicken
- Skinny Sloppy Joe’s
- Chicken ‘n Pineapple Coconut Curry
- Smoked Brisket
- Pork Shoulder with Homemade BBQ Sauce
- Chicken ‘n Broccoli Stir Fry with Pineapple
- Crowd-pleasing Chicken Enchilada Casserole
- Cemita – Mexican Pork Sandwich
- Käsekrainer – Pork sausage stuffed with cheese

- Luxurious Trés Leches Cake

- Pumpkin Ale Cupcakes with Maple Frosting and Candied Bacon
- Impress-Your-Guests Chocolate Bundt Cake
- Oatmeal Creme Pies
- \$1.33 Holiday Brownies
- Pumpkin Chocolate Chip Cookies
- Triple Layer Mint Oreo Brownies
- Crustless Coconut Custard Pie
- Lemon Puff Pastry
- Fudge of Legends
- The BEST Banana Pudding
- Chocolate Chip Cookie Bars
- Economical Peach Cobbler
  
- Truly Southern Shrimp ‘n Grits
- Broccoli-Cheese Quinoa Casserole
- Baked (yes, baked) Pea and Spinach Risotto
- Chicken Spaghetti (with Flair)
- Mac ‘n Cheese – Better than Your Mama’s
  
- Whitefish Aioli Sandwich
- Saffron Seafood Risotto
- Salmon with Roasted Bell Peppers and Lemon
- Coconut Curry Salmon
- Bangladeshi Shrimp with Pumpkin
- Salmon with Honey-Mustard Pan Sauce
- Homemade Smoked Salmon
- Citrus-Salsa Salmon
  
- 30-minute Broccoli Cheese Soup
- Easy Spicy Pumpkin Soup
- Epic, time-consuming, totally worth-it Vegetarian Chili
- Curried Butternut Squash Soup with Quinoa
- Avgolemono (Greek egg lemon) Soup
- Easy Garlic and Egg Soup
- Doro Wat – Ethiopian Spicy Chicken Stew
- Chicken Sausage & Bean Stew
- Gazpacho-esque Soup
- 10-Minute Southwest Veggie Soup