

For food professionals, memories of Mom include cooking



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Growing up in Glendale in the 1960s, Mike Engel remembers weekdays were always busy, but that didn't stop his mom, Judy, from making home-cooked meals most nights.

By Alysha Witwicki Special To The Journal Sentinel, Special to the Journal Sentinel

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For many people, thoughts of Mom often include her cooking. For food professionals, it's almost always the case. Whether she taught them how to cook, instilled a love of baking or invited every houseguest to stay for a meal, the memories are warm and lovely.

As Mother's Day approaches, it's a good time to travel with them down memory lane.

The six mothers here helped shaped their sons or daughters into the chefs (and adults) they have become. They lessons they taught in the kitchen may have seemed simple at the time, but their influence would last a lifetime.

MICHAEL ENGEL

Chef and owner at PasticheBistro & Wine Bar

Growing up in Glendale in the 1960s as a child of two Milwaukee Public Schools teachers, Engel remembers weekdays were always busy. But that didn't stop his mom, Judy, from making home-cooked meals most nights. Weeknights were simple with dishes like soup and bread or pot roast.

"She always did make time to put good food on the table, even when there wasn't a lot of money or time to prepare it," he said.

But it was her Sunday night meatloaf (accompanied by mashed potatoes and corn or peas) that Engel loves and remembers best.

"On Mondays I would look forward to a meatloaf sandwich in my lunch," he said. There was nothing particularly unique about this dish. It was a typical meatloaf with ground beef, onions and ketchup. "It was the simplest thing in the world, but I loved it."

Judy, 77, learned how to cook from her mother. One of their most cherished family recipes is a traditional German potato torte. It was a dessert the whole family would enjoy at the grandparents' house after church.

It's a dense, chocolate, spicy bundt cake with walnuts, made with leftover mashed potatoes and sour milk. Judy's mom covered it with chocolate buttercream, while her mother-in-law adorned it with white frosting.

When thinking about the culinary lessons his mom taught him, Engel said it is not skills but rather the outlook and enjoyment she got from feeding her family that Engel carries with him.

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ALAMELU VAIRAVAN

Cookbook author and host of "Healthful Indian Flavors with Alamelu" on Channel 10

When Vairavan thinks of her mom, Umayal (Uma for short), the first thing that comes to her mind is her warm spirit, kindness and hospitality.

Vairavan grew up in India as the oldest of five siblings, and her family had a full-time cook in the house along with a driver and a maid, which she says is very common in India.

"My mom was amazing," Vairavan recalled of her mom, 81. "Anyone who came to the house was welcomed. I remember the warmth and hospitality she showed to anyone that came to her house. I now do the same."

When her mom did cook, her food tasted delicious.

"She would make a dish with Cream of Wheat that we would have for breakfast called uppuma.

"She would add onions, tomatoes, ginger, cilantro and sauté it with spices."

She would also make a vegetable dish to go with it, like carrots in a lentil-based sauce called sambhar.

And no breakfast was complete without lots of madras coffee.

Something that was always in their refrigerator was a fresh chutney, such as tomato, peanut, eggplant or mint.

"My mother used whatever was available in the fridge. Her chutneys are always quick and amazing," she said.

Vairavan, who lives in Whitefish Bay, traveled to see her mom in India in February.

"The whole family went there to see Mom," she said. "I think about her, and I have such happy memories."

INGER WILKERSON

Blogger at artofnaturalliving.com

As a mom of three girls, Emily, 24, Margaret, 20, and Hilary, 17, Wilkerson believes in feeding her family homemade, natural and organic foods (all of which she blogs about at artofnaturalliving.com) in her Fox Point home.

She credits her love of cooking to her mother, Marian, 84, who lives in a retirement community in Milwaukee.

"Growing up, we'd play in the snow, and instead of giving us hot chocolate from a mix, she'd make it from scratch," Wilkerson said. "She'd boil and then simmer water, cocoa powder and sugar on the stove to get any lumps out and then add milk and vanilla. This is something I do for my kids."

She also fondly remembers the heart-shaped cutout cookies her mom would make for her classmates on Valentine's Day.

Wilkerson learned the secrets of her mom's famous Salisbury steaks firsthand.

"There's a gingerbread cake with boiled vanilla icing from my grandma that we can't re-create for anything," she said. "There's also a Danish meatball recipe we can't make either because no one wrote it down. The Salisbury steaks was one dish I wanted to have written down just like my mom used to make."

In addition to passing on family recipes, Wilkerson's mother also taught her how to get organized in the kitchen.

The family's Christmas Eve celebration consists of a multicourse meal for 20 people, and it's not unheard of for Wilkerson and her husband to host a family gathering with 50 extended relatives.

"She taught me you can serve really good food for a lot of people," Wilkerson said of her mother.

"For my oldest daughter's christening she made mini-quiches, curry and beef stroganoff by cooking a lot of the dishes ahead of time."

BECCA GURALNICK

Personal chef, caterer and cooking instructor



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FRESH BLOGS

Guralnick grew up in a Jewish household in Winnipeg, Manitoba. (All four of her grandparents are Eastern European and arrived in Canada before World War II.)

Despite the fact that both her parents were busy college professors, her mom, Belva, now 71, managed to get a hot meal on the table every night.

Her most memorable weekday meals were Swiss steak (thin cutlets of bottom round steak dredged in flour and pan fried in a tomato vegetable sauce), lasagna made with ground beef and cottage cheese, and kakletten (little pan fried hamburgers with fried onions) served with a mound of mashed potatoes, to which her dad would add corn and ketchup.

Her mother also made a killer matzo ball soup from scratch.

A salad with her homemade vinaigrette always flanked the meal. It is Guralnick's house vinaigrette to this day.

She also remembers many comfort food recipes featuring one of the "it" convenience ingredients of the time: Campbell's tomato soup.

Such dishes included alphabet soup meatloaf and spaghetti with meat sauce.

Guralnick also remembers the fancier party foods her mother excelled at, such as spanakopita and Asian sticky chicken skewers rolls rolled in sesame seeds.

"What my mom lacked in professional training, she made up for in droves with simple, well-cooked comfort food," Guralnick said.

"She taught me to use whole foods and vegetables whenever possible as well as simple preparation techniques."

JACQUELINE CHESSE

Owner of GoodyGourmets

There's nothing quite like mom's cooking. As best as we try to replicate it, it just isn't the same. Chesser knows this firsthand.

"My mom makes the best homemade yeast rolls that just melt in your mouth," she said of the rolls that accompany her dinner entrées.

"I've tried to make them myself and they didn't turn out. Whenever I try to make things like that, it just isn't like hers."

She grew up in a Southern family, and many of her mom's specialties were from scratch — like her peach cobbler with homemade crust and fresh peaches.

"That's my favorite," she said. "I'm a carb addict because of that. We would go to farmers markets and she would buy peaches and freeze them to use in pies."

One of the biggest lessons Chesser's mom taught her is that cooking is a life skill that every woman should have.

"As a teacher in your family, you can't do well if you aren't eating well," she said. "It's a skill that unities families."

RACHEL KRUSE

Owner of Sky Valley Foods based in Danville, Va. (which owns Organicville, Sky Valley and Bellas food brands)

They say the kitchen is the heart of the home. In Kruse's childhood household in Milwaukee, that was certainly the case.

"It was a fun, loving environment in the kitchen. The whole family would help," she said of her vegetarian clan.

Together, Kruse with her mom, dad and brother would make pastas, salads and homemade soups and breads together.

Her mom, Cheryl, 65, who resides in Milwaukee and Pucon, Chile, inspired her love of cooking. Kruse remembers her always trying new recipes.

"She taught me to buy organic and that you are what you eat," she said. "We will only feel as good or be as healthy as the food we put into our bodies."

A recipe that exemplifies this lesson is her mom's green salad with pears and feta that also includes pistachios, dried fruit and red grapes.

She would make a homemade olive oil and balsamic vinaigrette, which Kruse later bottled and sold under the Organicville brand.

"It reminds me of my youth and dreams to start my company," she said. "I'm passing down all the lessons my mom taught me to my daughter."

The Engels' German Potato Torte

This recipe is courtesy of Michael Engel. His family was divided on whether they liked vanilla or chocolate buttercream with this cake. He also said a simple dusting of powdered sugar or layer of chocolate ganache is delicious.

Makes 16 servings

Tested by Alysha Witwicki

Ingredients

½ cup shortening (tester used butter-flavor vegetable shortening)
2 cups sugar
5 eggs
1 teaspoon vanilla extract
1 cup leftover mashed potatoes (unseasoned)
2 cups flour
1 teaspoon ground cinnamon
1 teaspoon ground allspice
1 teaspoon baking soda
½ teaspoon ground cloves
½ teaspoon ground ginger
Pinch of ground nutmeg
1 cup unsweetened cocoa powder
3 ounces sour cream mixed with 3 ounces milk (¾ cup total)
¼ cup chopped walnuts plus more for garnish (divided)
1 batch of your favorite homemade buttercream frosting or chocolate ganache or powdered sugar for dusting

Preparation

Preheat oven to 350 degrees. Coat a bundt pan with vegetable oil spray and set aside.

In a large bowl, cream together shortening and sugar. Add eggs, one at a time, vanilla and mashed potatoes.

In a separate bowl, mix together flour, spices, baking soda and cocoa powder. Alternately add flour and sour milk mixtures to the shortening mixture. Mix in walnuts. Pour into prepared pan and bake in preheated oven 50 to 55 minutes, or until a cake tester or toothpick inserted into center comes out clean. Cool in pan 10 minutes, then remove from pan to a cooling rack.

Once cake is completely cool, frost with your favorite frosting and sprinkle with chopped walnuts. (Or, top with powdered sugar.)

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Salisbury Steaks

This recipe is courtesy of Inger Wilkerson via artofnaturalliving.com. It is often served with a side of mashed potatoes or pasta.

Makes 6 servings

Tested by Alysha Witwicki

Ingredients

Steaks:

1 pound ground beef
1 cup firmly packed soft bread crumbs
½ cup finely chopped onion
¼ cup finely chopped parsley
¼ teaspoon pepper
1 teaspoon salt
2 eggs, lightly beaten
¼ cup sherry
2 tablespoons vegetable oil (more as needed)
1 tablespoon butter

Rating: ☆ ☆ ☆ ☆ ☆ 0

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Gravy:

4 tablespoons flour
 2 cups beef broth
 1 quart sliced mushrooms
 ½ teaspoon salt
 1 tablespoon butter
 1 tablespoon onion soup mix

Preparation

Mix together beef, bread crumbs, onion, parsley, pepper, salt, eggs and sherry (can be done by hand or in a food processor) and form 6 patties, using about ½ cup mixture for each. Heat oil and 1 tablespoon butter in a large skillet over medium heat; add patties and fry to brown, about 3 to 4 minute per side. Remove patties from pan and set aside. If there are more than a few tablespoons of oil left in pan, partially drain oil, being sure to leave brown bits for the gravy.

Add flour to remaining fat in pan. Cook a few minutes, then gradually add beef broth, stirring with a whisk to thicken.

In a separate pan, place mushrooms in 1 tablespoon butter, add salt and sauté over medium heat until well-browned.

When gravy reaches consistency of thin gravy, add patties and mushrooms to pan. Simmer, covered, about 45 minutes.

Green Salad with Pears and Feta

This salad recipe is courtesy of Rachel Kruse.

Makes 2 main-dish servings or 4 side-dish servings

Ingredients

4 to 6 cups organic spring mixed greens
 ½ cup organic raisins or cranberries
 ½ cup pistachios
 1 cup organic red grapes
 2 organic pears, cored and sliced
 ¼ pound feta cheese, crumbled
 Organicville olive oil and balsamic vinaigrette, to taste

Preparation

Mix all salad ingredients together and drizzle with salad dressing. Serve.

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Cream of Wheat Uppuma

The following recipe is from "Healthy South Indian Cooking-Expanded Edition" by Alamelu Vairavan & Patricia Marquardt.

Makes 2 servings

Tested by Alysha Witwicki

Ingredients

1 tablespoon vegetable oil
 1 whole dried red chile
 1 teaspoon black mustard seeds
 1 teaspoon urad dal (see note)
 ¼ cup finely chopped onion
 1 cup quick or regular Cream of Wheat
 ½ teaspoon salt
 ½ teaspoon minced fresh ginger
 ¼ teaspoon minced green chile (more, if desired)
 2 cups warm water
 ¼ cup minced fresh cilantro
 1 teaspoon butter
 2 tablespoons roasted cashew halves (optional)

Preparation

Rating: ☆ ☆ ☆ ☆ ☆ 0

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Place oil in a skillet over medium heat. When oil is hot, but not smoking, add red chile, mustard seeds and urad dal.

When urad dal turns golden, add chopped onion and cook a minute. Add Cream of Wheat and stir a minute. Add salt, ginger and green chile.

Add warm water gradually to Cream of Wheat while stirring.

Cover and cook over low heat, stirring frequently, about 2 minutes. Add cilantro and butter. Stir well. Add cashews, if desired, and mix well.

Note: Split and skinned urad dal is available in Indian grocery stores.

Onion and Potato Kose

The following recipe is from "Healthy South Indian Cooking-Expanded Edition" by Alamelu Vairavan & Patricia Marquardt.

Makes 2 servings

Tested by Alysha Witwicki

Ingredients

2 tablespoons vegetable oil
2 to 4 slivers cinnamon stick
1 dry bay leaf
1 teaspoon black mustard seeds
1 teaspoon urad dal (see note)
½ cup chopped onion
1 cup small, peeled oblong pieces of russet potato
½ cup chopped tomato
½ teaspoon turmeric powder
½ teaspoon cayenne powder (or more, if desired)
1 ½ teaspoons ground cumin
½ cup tomato sauce
2 cups warm water
½ teaspoon salt
¼ cup chopped fresh cilantro

Preparation

Heat oil in a medium saucepan over medium heat. When oil is hot, but not smoking, add cinnamon stick pieces and bay leaf. Immediately add mustard seeds and urad dal. Cover and fry until mustard seeds pop and urad dal is golden.

Immediately add onion, potato and tomato to saucepan. Add turmeric powder and stir well. Cook uncovered over medium-low heat 1 to 2 minutes.

Add cayenne, ground cumin, tomato sauce and salt. Blend well. Add 2 cups warm water and blend well. When ingredients start to boil, add cilantro. Cook, covered, over low heat until potatoes are tender, 8 to 10 minutes, stirring frequently. Serve.

Note: Split and skinned urad dal is available in Indian grocery stores.

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Madras Coffee

The following recipe is from "Healthy South Indian Cooking-Expanded Edition" by Alamelu Vairavan & Patricia Marquardt.

Makes 1 serving

Tested by Alysha Witwicki

Ingredients

¾ cup 2% milk
¼ cup water
1 teaspoon instant coffee powder
½ to 1 teaspoon sugar

Preparation

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In a cup, mix milk and water. Transfer mixture into a small stainless steel saucepan and place pan on stovetop. Let mixture come to a full boil. As milk rises to the top (comes to a boil), remove from heat.

In another cup, mix coffee powder and sugar. Pour milk over coffee and sugar. Transfer contents from one cup to another a few times until a froth develops.

Pour the coffee into a cup and serve.

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