

Cooking

Thursday, 28 February 2008

"Cookery is not chemistry. It is an art. It requires instinct and taste rather than exact measurements." -Marcel Boulestin

Cooking has always been my passion. I enjoy experimenting with different cooking techniques, exploring with new herbs and spices, and paring foods with different and unique wines.

Whether giving a lecture on French cuisine or entertaining in front of the fire place in my farm kitchen, I have always enjoyed this art form.

It is my love for cooking that encouraged me to travel across the Atlantic to take the Advanced Intensive Cordon Bleu cooking course at Marylebone Lane in London, England. I had wanted to improve my technique and skills, and I felt that this school was the ideal place. Le Cordon Bleu courses are unrivalled in the amount of hands-on instruction they provided. We spent hours in professionally equipped teaching kitchens, preparing dishes from start to finish under the personal guidance of a Master Chef. It would consist, first, of just observing the instructor demonstrate a technique, and then we would have the opportunity to cook and make the recipes ourselves. Finally, we would be asked to critique and taste what we had created, and this ranged from pastries to advanced chicken dishes. There was also a strong focus on mastering skills, but once students were comfortable they were encouraged to experiment and develop their own style. Le Cordon Bleu challenges its students to adapt to modern demands while respecting French culinary traditions.

After completing this course at Le Cordon Bleu, I later travelled to Tuscany, where I studied Italian cuisine. I have given lectures and cooking demonstrations on Cordon Bleu techniques.

While I have had the opportunity to cook in these professional kitchens abroad, my favourite place to cook is, without a doubt, my own kitchen in Nova Scotia. I designed it to be over 700 feet with a fire place and 64 cabinets, as I love to host frequent dinner parties, including one event, where I held a feast for 180 people.

What I love most about cooking is that it allows me to share my love of food with friends, family and my fellow Canadians.

“A cookbook must have recipes, but it shouldn't be a blueprint. It should be more inspirational; it should be a guide.”-Thomas Keller

In 1981, I published a cookbook entitled “Men Can Cook Too!”, which is a guide to cooking for the budding gourmet chef. It is my firm belief that there is a growing interest among men to learn more about cooking.

It is obvious to everyone that men are some of the best chefs in the world. I think of Auguste Escoffier, Antoine Carme, Paul Bocuse, Georges Blanc, Alain Ducasse, and Pierre Troisgros. Cooking for other men may be intimidating as it seems like complex chemistry; mix one pinch of Ingredient A, with a dash of Ingredient B. However, I stress to my readers that cooking, at least for me, should first of all be fun. Second, cooking is a form of art and requires, above all else, imagination and creativity. I tell men in my book not to let “tradition and established ideas confine and restrict [them]” and to not “be bound by stereotyped menus.” The book went through three publications.

I am now making final edits my second cookbook, which I intend to dedicate to my mother who passed away in 1991. My mother was my mentor in the kitchen, as she instinctively knew how to do a lot with a little. I can still remember watching her in awe as she transformed our small farm harvest of fruits and vegetables, from our little garden in Wolfville, into mouth-watering treats and delicacies. I’ve concluded that part of her success in cooking was deeply influenced by our African origins. This inspired me to write this book, which looks at techniques for cooking chicken from original sources, from countries such as Ethiopia, Kenya, Nigeria, Botswana and South Africa. It follows their transformations to the West Indies, the United States and Canada. This book goes beyond ingredients and preparation, and discusses the

customs and celebrations of African chicken dishes; the aspect of cooking that really makes food a part of our heritage.

Good cooking, like any art form, takes a great deal of time, concentration, and dedication. But the finished product is always well worth the effort. I like to enjoy great things with good friends, and my dinner table is a place where I can do just that. For cooks, you know you've created a masterpiece when you see that look of satisfaction in guests' faces when they take their first bite. In the end I have the pleasure of gathering with friends and family around the table for an enjoyable evening. It remains my philosophy that is the more than just good food that makes the meal, but is the company and the ambiance.

Like all artists, I take great pleasure in sharing my craft, and I have included two recipes that will be in my next cookbook, which I hope you will enjoy with your friends and family.

Crispy Oven-Fried Chicken

- 1 egg
- ½ c. milk (125 mL)
- ½ c. all purpose flour (125 mL)
- 2 tbsp. sesame seeds (30 mL)
- 1 tbsp. baking powder (15 mL)
- 1 tbsp. paprika (15 mL)
- 1 tsp. salt (10 mL)
- 3 lb. chicken thighs (1 ½ kg)
- ¼ c. butter, melted (50 mL)

1. In bowl, whisk together egg and milk. In large bag, shake together flour, sesame seeds, baking powder, paprika and salt.

2. Dip chicken pieces, one at a time, into egg mixture; add to bag and shake to coat.

3. Place on foil-lined baking sheet and drizzle with butter. Bake in 350 F (or 180 C) oven for one hour or until crispy outside and juices run clear when chicken is pierced with a fork.

Crispy Corn Drumsticks

1 clove garlic

½ c. milk (125 mL)

12 chicken drumsticks

1/3 c. cornmeal (75 mL)

¼ c. flour (50 mL)

1 tbsp. ground cumin (15 mL)

1 tsp. paprika (5 mL)

1 tsp. dried oregano (5 mL)

1 tsp. salt (5 mL)

1 tsp. freshly ground pepper (5 mL)

½ to 1 tsp. cayenne (2 – 5 mL)

2 tbsp. vegetable oil (30 mL)

1. Crush garlic into the milk. Pour the garlic-flavoured milk over the legs and allow them to marinate for at least 20 minutes in the refrigerator.

2. In a large bowl or plastic bag, combine cornmeal, flour and spices. Toss legs into cornmeal mixture. Shake off excess.

3. Coat a large, shallow pan with the oil. Arrange legs in a single layer in the pan. Set on rack in the upper third of a preheated 400o F (or 200o C) oven. Roast for 30 minutes, turn pieces and continue to cook until the coating is crispy and nicely browned and the meat is cooked through, 10-15 minutes longer.

4. Serve legs hot, or place on a rack to cool, then wrap well in foil or plastic, or store in airtight container. Refrigerate until serving.