

Cooking Corner: Connections with readers keep us and them cooking

by Caroline Dipping

I have no doubt that right after Alexander Graham Bell uttered those first words into the telephone, "Mr. Watson - come here - I want to see you," he followed up with, "Do you know if I can freeze Egg Beaters?"

To which Mr. Watson - if he were really worth his salt - would have replied, "But of course."

KEEP COOKING - For best results, when the recipe calls for a Bundt pan, don't substitute a flat baking dish. CNS Photo by Don Kohlbauer. In my tenure as a food writer, the telephone has been a lifeline. It's the way I impart what scant kitchen wizardry I know, and it has been the forum for "meeting" hundreds of readers, many of whom have become regulars I can now recognize by voice.

The calls run the gamut from requests for roasting directions to storage and food safety questions. My modest arsenal of cookery books is backed up by what foodie 411 I can glean from the Internet, a blessed invention second only to the phone.

A good percentage of the calls are requests for recipes that mysteriously went missing almost as fast as they were clipped. Included here are some of the most recent culinary questions received, along with a few loved-and-lost recipes.

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Q: I found 30 jars of peaches on a shelf in my garage that I preserved in 1976. I know it was 1976 because they were all in Bicentennial canning jars. Can I still eat these? I put a lot of work into canning them.

A: I'm afraid you've missed that window of opportunity by about 31 years. Food that has been properly canned using an up-to-date, tested recipe and that has a vacuum seal will keep indefinitely, according to the folks at freshpreserving.com. However, changes do occur that can affect the flavor, color, texture and nutritional value of the product. For the highest quality, you had about one year to snarf up those home-canned peaches.

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Q: How much yeast is in a packet of active dry yeast? Mine didn't seem to foam up like it should, so I added a cake of compressed yeast to a bread recipe I'm trying.

A: In a 0.4-ounce envelope of active dry yeast, there is about 2 1/4 teaspoons. A 0.6-ounce yeast cake, which is fresh active yeast, is equivalent to 1 envelope of dry yeast. A 2-ounce cake is the equivalent of three envelopes of yeast.

Postscript: This reader, perhaps noting the concern in my voice, thoughtfully called back a few days later to let me know the extra yeast did not produce a result reminiscent of the infamous bread baking scene in an "I Love Lucy" episode.

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Q: I have a recipe that calls for kosher salt. Can I use table salt instead?

A: Yes, indeedly, but you would use just half as much table salt. The coarser-grained kosher salt does not pack as tightly, so it doesn't deliver the same salty punch that table salt does.

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Q: I found a jar of unopened mayonnaise with an expiration date of December 2006. Is it still good?

A: Mayonnaise, with its high acid content, thanks to vinegar or lemon juice, is not the big bacterial culprit many people fear when they come across a wilting tuna sandwich or a potato salad that has been left festering for hours on a picnic table.

However, the good folks at Best Foods (Hellman's east of the Rockies) aren't putting those dates on jars just for giggles. They recommend for optimum quality and freshness that you follow the "Best When Used By Date" on the jar.

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Q: If a recipe calls for a bundt pan, can I use another cake pan?

A: This is dicey business. I'm a fanatic about doing what I'm told when it comes to baking, so I wouldn't try substituting, say a 9-by-13-inch pan for a bundt pan. Generally, recipes that require a tube pan, angel food cake pan, or a bundt pan do so because that inner core helps ensure heat is distributed adequately. This is necessary for the cake to get to its proper doneness.

Having admitted my own baking timidity, I suggest you check out baking911.com for a Baking Pan Substitutions Chart that can have you transforming loaves to layers anytime you please.

Q: Can I freeze buttermilk?

A: You betcha. It has a freezer life of six weeks. Thaw it overnight in the fridge before you use it. It tends to separate when it thaws, but a quick stir handles the aesthetics.

Q: I'm organizing my spice cupboard. How long does cinnamon last?

A: It won't kill you if it's older, but ground cinnamon really loses its reason for being after hanging out on the pantry shelf two years.

Q: How do you blanch almonds?

A: It's as easy as boiling water. Matter of fact, that's exactly what you do. Boil up some water and dunk your almonds for no more than a minute. Drain them, and the skins should rub right off in a clean dish towel.

SAM'S SWEDISH MEATBALLS

8 ounces yolk-free egg noodles

1 (10-ounce) box frozen broccoli spears

Cooking-oil spray

1 pound extra-lean ground beef (defrosted if frozen)

1/2 cup packaged dry bread crumbs

1 egg

2 tablespoons nonfat or low-fat milk

2 teaspoons dehydrated minced onion flakes

1 teaspoon bottled minced garlic

1/2 teaspoon salt

1 (14.5-ounces) can beef broth

1 cup reduced-fat sour cream

Yields 4 servings.

Place noodles and broccoli in 2 1/2 quarts of boiling unsalted water. Cook, uncovered, until noodles are just tender, 8 to 10 minutes after water has returned to a boil.

Meanwhile, spray an extra-deep, 12-inch, nonstick skillet with cooking-oil spray and place it over

medium heat. While skillet heats, in 2-quart (or larger) bowl, combine beef, bread crumbs, egg, milk, onion flakes, garlic and salt. Mix well with a spoon or your hands.

Using cookie-dough scoop, form 24 balls from meat mixture and give each ball a quick roll with your hand to make it smooth. (If you don't have a cookie-dough scoop, use a heaping tablespoon of meat.) Place each meatball in the hot skillet as you form it. When about 6 meatballs are added, raise heat to medium-high. Once all meatballs are added, brown for 3 minutes, using a fork to turn meatballs frequently so they brown evenly.

Remove any visible fat from beef broth and add it to skillet. Cover skillet and cook until meatballs are no longer pink in center, about 8 minutes. As soon as noodles are tender, pour noodles and broccoli into colander to drain. Pour drained noodles and vegetables back into pasta pot, set it aside off heat and cover to keep warm.

Remove skillet from heat, move meatballs over to 1 side of skillet, and stir sour cream into broth on the other side of skillet. Stir until sour cream is well incorporated into broth, then stir to coat meatballs with sauce. (The sauce will be very thin.)

To serve, place some noodles on each plate and top with meatballs and sauce. Serve broccoli spears on side, topped with a bit of butter.

Nutritional analysis per serving: 698 calories, 30 g fat, 192 mg cholesterol, 49 g protein, 56 g carbohydrates, 651 mg sodium.

- Desperation Dinners, Feb. 18, 1998.

TOP SECRET CHILI'S CHICKEN ENCHILADA SOUP

1 tablespoon vegetable oil

1 pound skinless, boneless chicken breasts

1/2 cup diced onion

1 clove garlic, pressed

4 cups chicken broth

1 cup masa harina

3 cups water

1 cup enchilada sauce

1 (16-ounce) box Velveeta, diced

1 teaspoon salt

1 teaspoon chili powder

1/2 teaspoon ground cumin

Garnish

Shredded cheddar cheese

Crumbled corn tortilla chips

Salsa or pico de gallo

Yields 12 servings.

Place oil in large pot over medium heat. Add chicken and brown for 4 to 5 minutes per side. Set chicken aside. Add onion and garlic to pot and saute over medium heat for about 2 minutes, or until onion begins to become translucent. Add chicken broth.

Combine masa harina with 2 cups of the water in medium bowl and whisk until blended. Add masa mixture to pot with onion, garlic and broth. Add remaining water, enchilada sauce, Velveeta, salt, chili powder and cumin to pot, and bring mixture to a boil. Shred chicken into bite-size pieces and add it to pot. Reduce heat and simmer soup for 30 to 40 minutes, or until thick.

Serve soup in cups or bowls, and garnish with shredded cheese, crumbled tortilla chips and a spoonful of salsa.

- "Top Secret Restaurant Recipes 2" by Todd Wilbur (Plume, \$15.)

TANGERINE PIE

Pie shell:

4 egg whites

1/2 teaspoon cream of tartar

Dash of salt

1 cup sugar

Filling:

1/4 cup cornstarch

1/2 cup sugar

1/8 teaspoon salt

1 3/4 cups tangerine juice

1/4 cup lime juice

4 beaten egg yolks

1 1/2 teaspoons finely shredded tangerine peel

1 tablespoon butter

1 (8-ounce) container whipped dessert topping, thawed

Finely shredded tangerine peel or tangerine sections, for garnish

Chocolate leaves, optional

Yields 8 servings.

To make pie shell: Let egg whites stand in large mixing bowl at room temperature for 30 minutes. Add cream of tartar and dash of salt. Beat with an electric mixer on medium speed until soft peaks form (tips curl). Add 1 cup sugar, a tablespoon at a time, beating on high speed until very stiff peaks form (tips stand straight) and sugar is almost dissolved.

Spread mixture over bottom and up sides of a well buttered 9-inch pie plate. Bake at 300 F for 45 minutes. Turn off oven. Let shell dry in oven, with door closed, for 1 hour.

To make filling: In saucepan, combine cornstarch, 1/2 cup sugar and 1/8 teaspoon salt. Add tangerine juice and lime juice. Cook and stir until thickened and bubbly; cook and stir for 2 minutes more. Gradually stir hot mixture into beaten egg yolks; return to saucepan. Bring to a gentle boil, stirring. Cook and stir 2 minutes more. Remove from heat. Stir in shredded tangerine peel and butter. Transfer to a bowl; cover and cool 1 hour.

Fold 1/4 container whipped topping into thickened mixture. Spoon into prepared pie shell. Cover and chill at least 2 hours.

To serve, garnish with more whipped topping. If desired, decorate with tangerine peel or sections and chocolate leaves.

- Readers Ask, Dec. 4, 2002, via the St. Petersburg Times.

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