

taste buds
chef Larry
Janes

Forget about 'cute'

School has been back in session now for a few short weeks and already screams of despair can be heard coming from the kitchen. "What do you want me to pack for your school lunch?"

A few of the major newspapers have recently published stories about how to be creative when packing a school lunchbox. Gimmie a break. Just how creative can you be with peanut butter and jelly?

Yea, sure, these publications will give you paragraphs upon paragraphs about how to turn these brown paper bags into a Jewish deli, but check out the recipes. One of the major discrepancies I picked up on was that the recipes called for using Dijon mustard, homemade herb mayonnaise and those cute little mini-corns.

My kids would trade a sliced turkey on sourdough with French mustard for a PB&J (peanut butter and jelly) on Wonder and would throw in a free milk. Let's face it, no matter how creative you try to be with kids' lunches, most kids are just as happy to settle for a slice of cold pizza and an apple.

So what am I supposed to do? you ask.

FIRST OFF, put yourself on the same culinary plane as your kids. No sense cooking first class when something from a super-saver coach fare will suffice.

Kids aren't interested in opening a plastic Alf lunchbox and having a half pound of pastrami leak out of half-apita. Plastic Tupperware-type containers were made for creating sand castles in the sand-box, not for holding a jambalaya. Anything that remotely resembles carrot or celery sticks will be hidden by any fourth-grader, only to be tossed out on the way home or fed to the rabbits in Mr. Roberts' science class.

Beware of any recipe that calls itself anti-on-a-log. Who in the heck would even dare eat an ant, let alone on a green log? (For those of you who haven't yet read anything that resembles a kids' cookbook, anti-on-a-log is a strip of celery stuffed with cream cheese and sprinkled with raisins.) Speaking of raisins — they belong in oatmeal cookies or in bags of trail mix, not in those nerdy little boxes that you can never get your fingers into.

So what's a lunch packer supposed to do? It gets pretty expensive passing along three bucks everyday for Mickey D's (McDonald's), and you know the little guys won't eat a salad. They'll just pig out on burgers and fries.

Yours truly wishes he could hire someone like June Cleaver (Beverly mom). You never heard Wally and the Beave complain about their lunch. Of course, nowadays, people like June Cleaver charge more than three bucks a day and I don't own this paper — yet.

SIT DOWN with the little boppers and plan out a weekly lunch menu. Incorporate the kids in preparation as much as possible. Today, folks are content to keep the kids quiet in front of the boob tube, but how about spending 15 minutes together in the kitchen? Not outside stimuli, no music, no interruptions. Heck, even if you just make a few PB&J's together, you can share some stories about the garbage your mom used to fix you when you were a kid and had to walk to school in snowdrifts three feet high.

Rely on muffins and mini-loaves check full of natural ingredients. A mini-loaf of car-

CORN

Meal that came from the Indians

By Larry Janes
special writer

ALL THIS HOOPLA about polenta being the trend food of the '80s, not to mention the resurgence of cornbread as a true comfort food, really wouldn't be happening right now if the Indians had not introduced plain old-fashioned cornmeal to the early settlers.

As a matter of fact, the corn that the Indians taught the early settlers to grow was flint corn and not, contrary to popular belief, sweet corn on the cob.

The kernels of flint corn are comprised of small amounts of a soft starch, which is completely surrounded by a large quantity of hard starch. The kernels are very hard and lend themselves well to grinding, hence the making of cornmeal.

So where would chefs like Gulliano Bugialli and Jimmy Schmidt be without cornmeal? They certainly wouldn't be cutting crescent shapes of polenta, helping resurrect the cornmeal industry.

Up until last year, the cornmeal industry was relatively content with an occasional hype on the use of cornmeal, especially concerning its "natural" status and enriched varieties, which some flower children of the '60s would sneak into muffins to help make them more nutritious for children.

Now, however, with the rush to make polenta —

and, as Momma used to call it, johnnycake — cornmeal sales have risen dramatically.

SO WHAT else can be said about something as basic as cornmeal?

Well, for beginners, did you know that cornmeal comes in four basic colors? The major grocery chains will stock basic yellow and white cornmeal. But as you venture into the Southwest, you will notice more of an availability of cornmeal in not just yellow and white but also in such colors as blue and red.

These all hail from the same kind of flint corn. However, some of the kernels are different in color, with the nutritional makeup staying pretty much the same.

TWO DIFFERENT processes are used to make cornmeal, one called a wet milling and the other called dry milling. Both processes are used extensively.

The wet milling process involves taking cleaned kernels of corn and soaking them in water. The water is drawn off and the corn germ is separated from the kernel.

After the germ has been removed, the remainder of the corn kernel containing starch, gluten and bran is screened, and the bran is removed.

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For bread, muffins, even perch

EASY CORNBREAD

1 1/4 cups all-purpose flour
1/2 cup cornmeal
1/2 cup sugar
2 teaspoons baking powder
1/2 teaspoon salt
1 cup milk
1/2 cup vegetable oil
1 egg, beaten

Preheat oven to 375 degrees. Combine dry ingredients and mix well. Add milk, vegetable oil and egg and stir to mix. Pour the batter into a lightly greased 9-inch square baking pan and bake for 22 minutes.

CORNY OAT BANANA MUFFINS

A "natural" treat

4 ripe bananas, mashed
1/2 cup vegetable oil
1/2 cup honey
1 cup whole wheat flour
1/2 cup cornmeal
1/2 cup wheat germ
1 teaspoon cinnamon
1/2 teaspoon nutmeg
1/2 teaspoon salt
1 teaspoon baking powder
1/2 teaspoon baking soda
2 eggs

Combine all ingredients in the order given and mix well. Spoon into a prepared muffin pan (with or without paper) and bake at 350 degrees for 25 minutes.

PANFRIED CRISPY-HERBED PERCH

1/2 cup cornmeal
1/4 cup flour
1/4 cup parmesan cheese
1 tablespoon Good Seasons dry Italian salad dressing mix
1/2 cup milk
1/4 cup corn oil
2 pounds fresh perch fillets

Combine dry ingredients and mix well. Set aside. Dip perch in milk, then roll in dry seasoning mix. Set aside. Heat oil in a large skillet until hot, add perch slowly and reduce heat to medium. Continue cooking perch until golden, flip and cook for an additional one minute. Remove and drain.

Polenta popular in past, present



DAN DEAN/staff photographer

Marie and John Osborne like to cook their specialty, Polenta with Stuffed Misto Vitello (Italian Veal Stew), for dinner guests.

By Gert Rinschler
special writer

Food trends come and go, but the Northern Italian specialty, polenta, has been a popular dish since the first century.

Food historians like Waverly Root tell us that the earliest version of polenta, a simple cornmeal porridge, was named "puls" by the Etruscans who made it with wheat grain since cornmeal was not yet available.

Down through the ages, polenta has remained a staple food throughout most of Northern Italy.

Polenta, is yellow cornmeal that is boiled in water with salt and stirred constantly. It's often eaten hot with honey and spices or

served at room temperature in slices like bread.

Today, polenta is appearing on menus in trend-setting restaurants across the country including Detroit's Rattlesnake Club and Puncinello's in Birmingham. Polenta's versatility provides any cook with an unlimited number of ways to serve it. It can be deep fried as a garnish or made into a pie, such as polenta pasticciotto, which has a rich filling of smoked ham, cheese and mushrooms. Leftover polenta slices can be brushed with garlic butter, cheese and then melted in the broiler for a savory snack.

MARIE AND JOHN Osborne of Birmingham have been serving their guests Polenta with Stuffed Misto Vitello (veal stew) since they were first married. Marie, a WOMC radio news reporter, grew up eating po-

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