

taste buds

chef Larry Janes

Cast iron is worth its weight

How could I resist? With the onslaught of winter "home" sales, just about every color glossy stuffed into my Sunday paper proclaimed a sale on heavy, cast-iron cookware.

Most of the sales mentioned only cast-iron frypans but one sale in particular caught my eye: "with a four-piece cookware set including two frypans and a covered dutch oven. I toted the 20-pound-plus equipment throughout the store after becoming the proud owner of a brand-new set of cast iron cookware.

Mamma frequently cooked in cast iron, and to this day still hauls out a frypan and cauldron from the fruit cellar for impromptu Sunday morning egg tests and tummy-warming pots of chili.

Those of you who remember a glory that ran last year in Taste called for preparing the "ultimate brownie," in a large cast-iron frypan. I'll admit that when I tested the recipe for that brownie, I had to venture on down to Wyandotte to borrow Mamma's frypan. Unfortunately, the diet I'm now on will forbid me making the brownie recipe in my new-found cookware but, nevertheless, I look forward to testing new recipes in these toys.

WHY ALL THE hoopla on cast-iron cookware? Cast-iron cookware is heavy. It absorbs heat slowly and evenly, retains it like no other and is a good conductor of heat as well — all excellent qualities for a cooking vessel to possess.

Unfortunately, there is a negative side, too. Cast iron is rather brittle. It rusts, stains and becomes pitted on exposure to air, dampness and some foods, and it tends to become distorted when heat is applied.

Food purists will either applaud cast iron for its ability to impart certain minerals into the food while cooking or crucify it for its inability to withstand the pitting that occurs from cooking foods high in acidity.

From a professional standpoint, you just can't beat cast iron's ability to slowly cook a stew or chili, seldom burning it. Sunny-side eggs take on a distinctive crust that I still remember from the days when Mamma cooked up a pound of bacon and then plopped in a half-dozen or so eggs into the molten, bacon grease.

She would use the special steel spatula, that doubled as a dreaded disciplinary tool, to splash the grease onto the tops of the eggs to just barely cook the tops. It wouldn't take an expert to see and taste the difference from an egg made in a plastic-handled non-stick frypan compared to one made in a cast-iron frypan.

THERE ARE, of course, a few pointers that all owners of cast-iron cookware should heed. First off, cast-iron cookware is particularly likely to become warped if subjected to high heat or sudden extremes in temperature. Therefore, never place cast-iron cookware directly on a high-heated burner or in a hot oven. Place the cookware on a cold burner or in a cold oven and allow the heat to rise gradually.

Common sense should prevail when cooking with cast iron because of its heavy, heat conduction. You can cook and get the same results over a medium-low heat compared to high heat.

After using the cookware, it should be washed, dried and seasoned immediately. Never place the cookware filled with food in the refrigerator, freezer or dishwasher. If the food has turned or stuck on the bottom or sides, scouring will remove some of the seasoned coating but a light scrubbing with table salt and dry paper towel will remove any leftover food residue with minimal efforts.

If you have a gas or an electric stove, you will notice a difference when cooking with cast iron. If nothing else, you will benefit from the lifting. Don Appelt!



Southfield nutritionist Gail Posner conducts group tours, pointing out healthy food choices to make in the supermarket. Here

she escorts the Birmingham-Bloomfield Newcomers Club around the Shopping Center Market in Farmington Hills.

DAN DEAN/staff photographer

Getting smart about groceries

THESE DAYS, it seems like you need to be a registered dietitian to make intelligent choices at the grocery store.

But if you can't become a dietitian, maybe you can at least bring one along. That's what a group of women from the Birmingham-Bloomfield Newcomers Club did on a recent weekday morning.

The 10 women took a guided tour of the Shopping Center Market at Orchard Mall in Farmington Hills. They were accompanied by nutrition counselor Gail Posner, who has a master's degree in nutrition and 10 years experience in the field. Posner offers the tours as part of her private nutrition counseling practice.

Providing free samples along the way, she walked the group past the butters, the chips, the breads, the cheeses and the yogurts, pointing out what were really healthy choices and what merely seemed to be.

Posner started out with a basic primer on fats in food, since that is the main concern when it comes to lowering cholesterol and reducing the chance of cancer and other diseases. She explained there are three types of fats: saturated fats, polyunsaturated fats and monounsaturated fats. The saturated fats, found in animal fat, lard, whole milk and tropical oils such as coconut oil, are high in cho-

lesterol and should be minimized.

POLYUNSATURATES — In corn oil, sunflower oil, mayonnaise and walnuts — have been considered a good choice until recently. But it has been discovered, Posner said, that polyunsaturates not only lower the unwanted low-density lipoproteins (LDLs) in the blood but also lower the high-density lipoproteins (HDLs), thought to help combat cholesterol. So the best choice when it comes to fats, she said, are the monosaturates: canola oil, rapeseed oil, peanut oil, olive oil and hi-oleic safflower oil.

"When we compare the monosaturates with saturated fats, we're not talking

about moderately worse," Posner said. "We're talking a major dietary disaster."

First stop on Posner's tour were the dairy products. Pointing out that regular cheddar cheese has 110 calories an ounce, she offered several cheeses that are very low in fat and calories — two to three grams per slice and 35 calories. She also had them try some reduced-calorie cheeses — such as Kraft Lite Line — which have five to six grams of fat, but which the group seemed to agree taste better.

Next stop on the tour was the snack foods. Here the issue is not cholesterol but fat.

"Don't go and find some bag of potato chips labeled 'no cholesterol' and then say, 'Aren't you proud of me?'" Posner said with a laugh. "All potato chips are made with vegetable oil and are cholesterol-free. But you need to look at what kind of oil is used. And no matter what you buy, it's still a lot of fat."

FOR LOW-FAT snacks, Posner recommends pretzels (you can have 30 or so small stick pretzels for a serving), popcorn popped without oil and sprayed with a vegetable spray, and rice or popcorn cakes. Watch out for microwave popcorns though. Many are loaded with fat. Posner particularly recommends the flavored rice cakes and the popcorn cakes, which have more flavor than plain rice cakes.

Next, Posner stopped in front of the breads. The key to choosing breads, she said, is making sure whole wheat flour is listed as the first — and therefore the major — ingredient. If it says wheat flour, that means it's just white flour and doesn't offer enough fiber.

The group also sampled a new line of Entenmann's baked goods, which have no fat and fewer calories than the company's other products. They tried cakes, coffeecakes and cookies, and seemed universally pleased. Posner approves of

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Improve health with these tips

10 TIPS FOR EATING BETTER AND EATING LESS

- Have fresh vegetables washed and cut in your refrigerator at all times for snacking.
- Get rid of high-calorie leftovers right away. Give them away or throw them out.
- Try frozen fruits — grapes, banana slices, pineapple chunks — for snacks.
- Use butter substitutes on vegetables.
- Buy one doughnut from the bakery rather than a package of 12 from the store.
- Eat slowly and drink water between bites.
- Substitute ground turkey for ground beef in recipes.
- Shop quickly to avoid triggering eating cues.
- Store problem foods in a hard-to-reach spot, or eliminate them altogether.

Italian restaurant has homey quality

On the edge of the Rosedale Garden section of Livonia, there's a neighborhood Italian restaurant that embodies all the warmth and homeyness you might expect to find in a village restaurant in Italy.

At DePalma's, strangers greet you as if you are old friends. The hostess seats you in a cozy booth in a dim, unpretentious room. A woman with a lovely soprano voice plays the baby grand and sings "Santa Lucia" as you read through the extensive menu. Then a young waiter wearing a white shirt and black vest chats a moment before taking your order for wine and hors d'oeuvres.

Even Scrooge would have to enjoy an evening that starts like that.

DePalma's is about to mark its second anniversary, but its chef and owner, Vito N. DePalma, has been cooking around Detroit for several years. The restaurant is clearly more than a business to DePalma. One of his two managers is Syd Harris, a former restaurateur himself, who works the room like a politician and makes sure the service is "perfecto." And on Wednesday nights, the restaurant becomes a theater of sorts as the members of the Verdi Opera Society pay homage to Enrico Caruso.

Guests are coddled and entertained — and served hearty, Italian cooking. The meals range from pastas and fresh fish to a wide range of veal dishes. A surefire winner is theveal zingara, a delicious and salty



combination of black olives, prosciutto, sun-dried tomatoes and thin slices of veal sautéed in butter and sherry. It is excellent.

A DISH OF fettuccini with fresh mussels was good, though a tremendous portion. The mussels, served in their shells and cooked exactly, were tossed with the fresh noodles and tomato sauce. Though we found the sauce a little oily, it was seasoned gently and deliciously. The pasta was freshly made.

With most entrees comes a choice of soup or salad, a side dish of pasta or a potato and a fresh vegetable. Few guests ever get to the desserts — and many leave carrying the portions they couldn't finish and

couldn't part with.

The restaurant serves a very good minestrone, which almost resembles a bean soup. It doesn't have a heavy tomato taste to it. The breads are wonderful, from the Italian bread with a very heavy crust to the La Vache, a sweet matzo-like bread.

Even the fresh green beans — served with our dinners were crisp and good. Alas, we were disappointed in the lemon shrimp appetizer, in which the shrimp and artichoke hearts were overcooked.

The wine list is as comfortable and unpretentious as the restaurant. It provides ample selections but isn't outrageously expensive or exclusive.

Overall, DePalma's is a special place where you will find good meals, friendly and attentive service and reasonable prices. The lunch menu features your expected selection of pastas, sandwiches and salads — with several interesting variations — like a meatball submarine or a chicken parmesan sandwich or the pineapple royale in which a pineapple is stuffed with chicken salad, topped with toasted almonds and served with fresh fruit.

All dinner and lunch entrees are available for take out, and the restaurant offers a fax service where you can gather lunch (or even dinner party) orders and be assured they will be ready when you are. It is a business after all.

DePalma's, 31735 Plymouth

Road, west of Merriman, Livonia, 261-2430.

Lunch, Monday-Friday, 11 a.m. to 4 p.m.; Dinner, Monday-Friday, 4-11 p.m., and Saturday, 5-11 p.m. Private parties Saturday afternoon and Sunday. Reservations

accepted for lunch and dinner.

Prices: Lunch \$3.95-\$7.95. Dinner \$6.25-\$16.95. MasterCard, Visa, American Express, Discover.

Rating: Very good. Genuine.



Chef-owner Vito DePalma is shown with an array of Italian specialties — spring salad, (left), spinach tortellini and a pasta variety, as well as some of the restaurant's homemade breads — at DePalma's in Livonia.

JIM JAGDELD/staff photographer