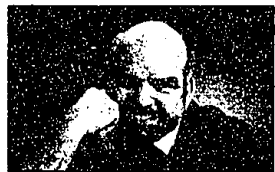


MONDAY, APRIL 25, 1994

TASTE

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TASTE BUDS



CHEF LARRY JANES

Treat yourself to savory cheesecake

Everyone talks about getting into shape for summer. But I have this sneaking suspicion that most of you out there are like me - just talk. Unfortunately, this is not the column for those looking for something healthy. As a matter of fact, in addition to being somewhat fattening, the stories and recipes that follow are from my secret hiding place tucked away back in the Janes Gang cupboard.

When we try a recipe that "knocks our socks off" this is where it goes. Not that there aren't any healthy favorites hiding back there - I've even cooked these, everyone goes ballistic. Unfortunately, so does the waistband, and bathroom scale.

Mention "cheesecake" and everyone conjures up the calorie laden, artery clogging who-wants-to-lick-the-plate version of something sweet for dessert. If you're in the mood for something that has the appeal and decadence of cheesecake, but want to serve it for lunch, brunch, a light dinner or buffet, then you're about to discover the "other cheesecake."

Do ahead treats

Dubbed savory cheesecakes, these do ahead treats combine the taste of cheesecake with a smooth velvety texture. They take the same form as their sweet counterparts, but the flavorings are a real surprise. From the exterior, they look like cheesecakes. Instead of a graham cracker crust, most savory cheesecake crusts are made with a combination of toasted bread crumbs, grated cheese and melted butter.

The essential filling remains the same - cream cheese. Cottage cheese and/or ricotta can be added to lighten the taste, and if need be, calories. The other ingredients are eggs, a healthy dose of fresh herbs and, if you choose, a meal-maker main ingredient like crab, shrimp, pesto, cooked fish or chicken.

Chef's secrets

There are a few secrets that usually separate cooks from chefs and they include pre-toasting fresh bread crumbs. I will confess that yes, I too have a box of seasoned bread crumbs in my pantry, but if you're going to go to the trouble to make a savory cheesecake, you might as well use fresh bread crumbs in the processor or blender and toast them in the oven until golden for optimum results. It will be worth it.

The small amount of finely grated cheese needed to make a flavorful crust should also be freshly grated and not of the "no or low-fat" variety. If you wish, it could prove to be a substitute and only that. The recipe calls for butter in the crust, but even I save butter for elaborate occasions. A good margarine makes a double substitute.

All chilled or refrigerated ingredients, including eggs and cream cheese, should be allowed to sit out at least an hour or so for best mixing.

But when it comes to the filling, the word savory as described by The Merriam-Webster Dictionary means "having a specified taste, smell and quality." The savory in these cheesecakes comes from herbs and only fresh ones will do.

Dried herbs have been tried and are acceptable, but there really is no comparison between fresh and dried. This is the season in metro Detroit when fresh herbs are just about as abundant as they will ever be.

Produce stands and gardening centers will have pots of fresh herbs now through late June. Buy a pot, snip off the fresh herbs for the recipe and then plant in a sunny spot to enjoy all summer. In July, you will thank me for this tip.

The only other secret is to make savory cheesecake in a spring-form pan although a deep dish pie plate is another acceptable cooking vessel. These cheesecakes, by the way, can be made several days in advance and then refrigerated. The finished cakes are at their peak of taste 24-36 hours after baking, and if you must refrigerate them, make sure you bring them to room temperature before enjoying their elaborate tastes.

Oh, and one last thing: If you still wish to keep the diet regimen going strong, remember that these savory cheesecakes are like their sweet cousins - very rich. Thin slices are definitely in order but remember, one can never be too rich or too thin, right?

See Larry Janes' family-tested recipes inside. To leave a message for Chef Larry, dial 953-2047 on a touch-tone phone, then mailbox number 1888.

LOOKING AHEAD

What to watch for in Taste next week:

■ Spoil mom on Mother's Day with a tasty brunch. Meet a family who declares the kitchen off limits to mom on her day.

■ Toast spring with Cru Beaujolais, a fruity wine that can satisfy red wine drinkers on warm days.



STAFF PHOTO BY SHERAQUE LUCY

Flavor fiesta: Chef John Vanderwouwe presents some flavorful ways to celebrate Cinco de Mayo. Pollo Rebozado (below) is a colorful chicken dish.

CELEBRATE CINCO DE MAYO

CONQUER MEXICAN CUISINE



BY JOAN BORAM
SPECIAL WRITER

A Mexican national holiday, Cinco de Mayo commemorates the Battle of Puebla, May 5, 1862, when Mexican forces, outnumbered 3 to 1, defeated the invading French forces of Napoleon III.

Cinco de Mayo is celebrated by Mexicans wherever they may be, with parades, festivals, and feasting.

At Plymouth Landing, in Plymouth, every month is a celebration of a national cuisine. In May, it's fiesta time, when Mexican and Southwestern dishes are added to the regular menu for the entire month.

"But the real high point of the month is Cinco de Mayo," said co-owner Angelo Plakas. The restaurant is decorated especially for the event, and music is provided by a mariachi band.

Chef John Vanderwouwe, who also teaches in the acclaimed Schoolcraft College culinary arts program in Livonia, has devised a special Cinco de Mayo menu

that features Mexican appetizers and entrees.

If we ever run out of blessings to count, let us be grateful for having been born into a world that cooks with tomatoes, corn, turkey, peppers: bell (sweet) and chilies (hot), lima and "French" beans, peanuts, and chocolate.

Cooking must have been pretty boring until Cortes and the 400 Spaniards who accompanied him discovered Mexico (and all of the above) in 1519.

Tortillas were the foundation of the Mexican diet. Dried corn kernels were crushed with a stone roller to form a paste, extra water being added if necessary. The dough was kneaded and slapped into thin round cakes and cooked on a hot plate over the fire.

Beans supplied most of the protein in the diet and were usually boiled. Refried beans, topped with grated cheese, became a feature of the table only after the

See MEXICAN, 2B

New products make it easier to eat low fat



LAURA LETOUR

Fourteen years ago Marie Rix of Plymouth was faced with a dilemma. Her husband had bypass heart surgery and she needed to change the way she cooked to cut the fat in her family's diet. She immediately stopped serving red meat, cut back on butter, and bought an air popper for popcorn. Because there weren't many low-fat items on the market 14 years ago, Rix had to eliminate many of her favorite low-fat alternatives to replace them.

Then came the flood of low-fat and fat-free products to our grocery stores. Rix can now have the cheese she once gave up by using a low-fat brand. She and her husband can enjoy frozen yogurt instead of feeling guilty after eating ice cream. Two of her favorite low-fat snacks are Snackwell's devil food cookies and Health Valley raspberry granola bars. She has found the largest selection of Health Valley products at Kroger stores.

Her Chicken Almondine recipe originally called for cream of chicken soup. Rix said she prefers Campbell's Healthy Request Cream of Mushroom. The greatest amount of fat came from the almond slivers. The original recipe used one cup of almonds. This was a whopping 70.5 grams of fat! By decreasing the quantity to one ounce, the fat from the almonds dropped to 14 grams.

Fat-free mayonnaise is another great way to reduce fat. But I personally find it to have a very artificial flavor. I use low-fat mayonnaise instead. It will add five grams of fat per tablespoon or a total of 40 grams of fat to this recipe. If you choose to use low-fat mayonnaise instead of fat-free, decrease the amount to 1/4 cup. This will add a better flavor with only 20 additional grams of fat.

For a complimentary issue of "Laura's Fat Free Kitchen" newsletter, send a self-addressed,

See LOW FAT, 2B



Chicken Almondine Original Recipe

3 boneless, skinless chicken breasts, cooked and diced
1 can (10.75 ounce) cream of chicken soup
1/2 cup mayonnaise
1 cup diced celery
1 cup cooked rice
2 hard-cooked eggs, cut up
1/2 cup grated onion
1 cup corn flakes, crushed and buttered
1 cup slivered almonds

Mix chicken, soup, mayonnaise, celery, rice, eggs and onion in an 8 by 8-inch baking pan. Top with corn flakes and almonds. Bake 35 minutes at 350 degrees F. Serves 4.

RECIPE MAKE OVER



Chicken Almondine Reduced-Fat Recipe

3 boneless, skinless chicken breasts, cooked and diced
1 can (10.75 ounce) Campbell's Healthy Request 99 percent fat-free cream of mushroom soup
1/2 cup fat-free mayonnaise
1 cup diced celery
1 cup cooked rice
3 hard-cooked eggs
1/2 cup grated onion
1 cup corn flakes, crushed
1 ounce slivered almonds (about 2 tablespoons)

Remove yolks from hard-cooked eggs and discard. Chop egg whites. Combine chicken, soup, mayonnaise, celery, rice, egg whites and onion in an 8 by 8-inch non-stick baking dish. Top with corn flakes and almonds. Bake for 35 minutes at 350 degrees F. Serves 4.