

MONDAY, AUGUST 29, 1994

TASTE

TASTE BUDS



CHEF LARRY JONES

Momma shares secrets for delectable biscuits

Many thanks to all of you who leave questions and comments on my voice mail. Your calls keep me on my toes, and each week I find myself digging through my cookbook collection looking for answers to your questions.

Every now and then, I get questions about "Momma." She hasn't been mentioned much this summer. For the curious, Momma's doing just fine, and has been on a bing-o kick lately. As a matter of fact, she has been pretty lucky playing at an obscure hall somewhere in Flat Rock. Last week, on one of my visits, Momma was pulling a batch of her famed bran muffins from her oven. Momma says, they're "guaranteed to start movin' your system." Momma never was much of a baker, and her claim to fame for the bran muffins comes right from the box of Nabisco All Bran cereal.

Buttermilk biscuits

Every now and then, sometimes with the help of a box of Jiffy mix, a batch of blueberry muffins would grace the breakfast table. But what we kids really remember and crave, especially with the abundance of fresh summer fruits, was her famed biscuits.

The ingredients for Momma's delicious buttermilk biscuits were not measured with measuring cups and spoons. Momma scooped the flour with her hand, and sprinkled in just the right amount of baking powder. She rolled out the dough, and cut out the biscuits with a Detroit Lions glass she got about 20 years ago at a gas station. The glass holds a revered place in the top kitchen cabinet, out of reach of the grandkids' careless arms. It is used just for cutting out rolled biscuit dough.

When I asked Momma if she had any great secrets she wished to share, she smiled, took a long swig of her microwaved coffee and thought for a few seconds.

Her first secret for delectable biscuits is that after you work the fat into the flour, you need to move quickly because too much handling makes a tough product.

Momma claims that the first pan of biscuits is "always the best," based simply on the fact that they are the first rolled, cut, and baked biscuits, and the dough hasn't been handled twice, cut twice and rolled twice. Little does Momma realize that she took those words right out of Pillsbury's mouth. In their "The Complete Book of Baking," (copyright 1993, Viking, \$25.00), the folks at Pillsbury say that baking with a rolling pin and powder begin to interact immediately with liquids and that any product with baking soda and/or powder should be baked immediately for optimum results.

Momma then went on to say that was the only real "secret" to her best biscuits and muffins. Having made biscuits and muffins that never had the lightness and great taste of Momma's, I knew she had to be more information than what she was offering.

I asked when she was leaving for her next bing-o session, and when the response was "not until tonight," I walked to the sink and found the big crockery bowl that is a staple in the kitchen of everyone over the age of 75. Then I culled the necessary ingredients from her pantry cabinet for a "hand's on" personal demonstration.

Her recipe was simple enough: flour, salt, baking powder, Crisco and milk. Momma sifted the dry ingredients with a wire mesh strainer (not unlike the battery-operated sifter I use). As mentioned earlier, she uses her fingers to mash in the shortening, similar, I assume, to that stainless pastry cutter I use.

Secret revealed

She scoffed when I mentioned using a food processor to mix the ingredients. But what was this next step? She reached into the freezer for the quart of milk. "How did that get in there?" I asked. "When you were on your hands and knees searching for the bowl, I put the milk in the freezer to get it good and chilled," she responded. Ah ha! Secret number two revealed: the colder the liquid, the better the biscuit.

She also scoffed when I asked if skim or low-fat milk could be used. She scraped the sides of the bowl with a wooden spoon for 30 seconds, plopped the mixture onto the lightly floured table. Could her secret to the best biscuits be her old Formica-covered table? I use a solid maple pastry board. She kneaded the dough, just for a minute, then made four quick swipes with the rolling pin, reached for her Detroit Lions glass, and cut out a baker's dozen of biscuits, leaving just a tad of dough that she claimed "wasn't worth playing with."

She placed the biscuits on an ungreased cookie sheet and into the preheated 450 degree oven. About 12 minutes later, I'd grabbed the margarine and joined us. The three of us ate nine biscuits, I left two, and ate two in the car on the way home.

I don't know: I went home and did exactly what she did and mine couldn't even begin to compare. Anyone know where I can pick up a 20-year-old Detroit Lions glass?

See Larry Jones' family-tested recipes inside. To have a message for Chef Larry, dial 933-9105 on a touch-tone phone, then mailbox number 1886.

LOOKING AHEAD

What to watch for in Taste next week:

■ Labor Day salute to traditional family meals.

■ Discover Provence and its wines.



DEBBIE BRUENING/STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

Making lunch: Debbie Bruening (left) watches as her twin daughters, Ashley and Trisha, pack a nutritious lunch for school.

Pack school lunches your kids will eat

Back-to-school bells will soon be ringing. It's time to get ready for the morning rush, and brown bag lunch brigade. Moms share tips for packing good, wholesome foods that won't be tossed in the garbage can.

by SANDRA DALKA-PRYSBY

While many parents are elated about having their children return to school, some are worried about what they'll eat for lunch.

"I'm not always sure that my kids eat well when they buy their lunches at school, so most of the time I make them at home," said Cindy Cares, a Southfield mother of three. "Although I pack some nutritious things that the kids like, I still have no guarantee that they'll eat them."

Cares, a youth services librarian at the Southfield Public Library, has experienced school lunches from two sides. One as the mother of Steven, 16, Katherine, 13, and Jonathan, 11, and also as a former lunchroom supervisor for Birmingham Public Schools.

"As a 'lunch lady,' I learned real fast what kids eat and what they throw away. Unfortunately, most don't eat fruit and vegetables."

She added parents would be shocked at the amount of food kids throw away. "It makes no difference if lunches are brought from home or bought at school. There is a great deal of waste."

According to Cares, the waste is a result of visually unappealing or "boring" food, too little time for younger kids to eat, and too much food - especially when

it comes to home-packed lunches.

"Boring food was the excuse 13-year-old Kim Hack of Troy gave her mother, Margaret for why she didn't like lunches from home. Margaret got creative."

"When Kim first started school, I would just throw together lunches without putting much thought into them," Hack said. "Sometimes, I'd put in leftovers, but most of the time I'd make the same lunch, meat sandwiches and use the same fruit, day in and day out."

She added that, over the years, and with input from her daughter, she added variety by making sandwiches on bagels or in pita bread. She also made healthier lunches by including more vegetables and her own no-fat vegetable dip. Kim, a Smith Middle School student, buys lunch at school more often now.

"It's a peer pressure thing. It's uncool to bring lunch from home," Hack said.

"When Kim first started buying lunch at school, I worried she would make poor food choices, especially with all the junk food vending machines. But she seems to do OK. Also, I am reassured because school officials are attempting to improve the quality and nutritional level of the foods served in schools. (See related story)

See LUNCHES, 28

Challah is crown jewel of Jewish New Year

Holiday breads: Dena Sanders of Zeman's Bakery with a tray of freshly baked challah. Besides shaping these cake-like breads in unique ways, extra honey and white raisins are often added.



BY ANNE LEHMANN
SPECIAL WRITER

Of all the special foods which grace the Rosh Hashana (Jewish New Year) table, there is none more common yet distinctive than the traditional loaf of egg bread known as challah. Its familiarity stems from it being a year-round favorite, served weekly as part of the special Sabbath meals. It is especially unique during the High Holidays, because the traditional twisted shape gives way to rounded loaves, many of which are laced with extra honey and white raisins.

Most people view the rounded loaves as a symbol of the cyclical nature of life. But according to Rabbi Elimelech Silberberg of Sarah Tugman Baie Chabad Torah Center in West Bloomfield, "there are many themes to Rosh Hashana. The primary theme, however, is that it is coronation day when Jewish people resolve to accept G-d as the sovereign ruler of the universe. The round shaped challahs are reminiscent of the crown of royalty."

Although the rounded challah is most commonly known and used, there are those who shape the loaves in unusual ways to recall the significance of the holiday. Some fashion their dough in the

See RECIPES, inside.