

MONDAY, MARCH 25, 1996

TASTE

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TASTE BUDDS



CHEF LARRY JANES

There's grace in saying thank you

I recently had lunch with a few friends from Canton. We ventured out to The Common Grill in Chelsea, had a delectable brunch and then strolled through town, enjoying temperatures hovering near forty degrees. One of the women commented on how nice it was to have her door opened as we entered and exited the car. I accepted the verbal gratitude and quietly thanked my patrons for teaching me some element of manners.

I was raised to respect others, and just as important, to give thanks. The peoples of every religion have from time immemorial said prayers, blessings, and words of gratitude for the food they eat; but these days, you don't see many families bowing their heads at McDonald's or other popular family restaurants.

Last month, at the start of Lent, my parents were the only folks I noticed to be walking around with a gray smudge of ash on their forehead, and it was my mother who reminded me to refrain from eating anything with meat on Ash Wednesday. I am not a person of conventional ritual; my rituals tend to be personal and familial, but I do give thanks for my food. I am deeply aware that there are many who do not have enough. When I volunteer to cook, clean, or work at a soup kitchen, I give thanks for my bounty.

When I taste a tomato plucked from my back yard garden, vine-ripened by the sun, chilled by the night air and bursting with juice, I am grateful, and awed by nature and its power. When I can get food without pesticides, I give thanks to conscientious farmers.

When a wait person offers me service that compliments the meal, I am grateful, likewise, when the chef prepares a treat for my tongue, I alert the management.

Lessons to share

I continue, to this very day, to share with my children my wonder and thankfulness at our bounty. I don't want my children to thank me for making them dinner. I simply want them to stop, slow down and savor what it is they are eating, to pause and appreciate it and where it came from rather than stuffing it down simply as fuel, a home version of fast food. Granted, there are days when my daughter utters "shall we say grace?" and everyone scrabbles in unison. "GRACE!" But we still take the time. The standard "Bless us oh Lord, for these thy gifts" still remains the most popular prologue to dinner, but occasionally, we go around the table asking each person to say what he or she is thankful for at that very moment.

The neighborhood kids seem to enjoy this version. If children are asked when they are prepared - mine do their homework at the kitchen table, much like I did mine - they may also learn that the ritual of cooking is important, normal, and God forbid, even easy. The dinner table continues to be the place where the James Gang has an opportunity to talk, even sometimes about food, about their achievements, hurdles, and the events of the day. Taking time to savor one another, to really listen to the doings, opinions, and emotions of all is a form of mealtime grace. Such expressions of gratitude are hardly prayers but they serve a similar purpose.

Giving thanks

Whether a formal grace is recited or a personal sentiment is offered, anyway you look at it, it's starting a gathering around a table, a table laden with food for which we are grateful. I am proud to say that grace (or the lack of it) is not something that used to be said and done thirty years ago. Last fall, when I attended the National Chili Cookoff in Little Rock, Ark., a faux cowboy was called to the podium and offered a "cowboy prayer" of thanks.

Last week at an impromptu lunch at the Golden Mushroom in Southfield, I noticed a group of businessmen bow their heads and give thanks immediately after their appetizers were served. Movie stars and rock stars give thanks during their acceptance speech. Even at our church, when the collection basket is passed, if there's no money to give, it's suggested that we "blow a kiss" into our hands and offer that as thanks. We must learn to extend grace and make it a part of gracious living.

It doesn't have to be sterling tea sets, fine china and servants, but as expressed in the preparation of meals, with a sense of pleasure, as a gift. Grace is something that is taught and shared. I am grateful that I was taught how to open car doors for others, how to pray, and especially, how to give thanks.

LOOKING AHEAD

What to watch for in Taste next week:

■ Focus on Wine.



Walnut Cake: Make this cake the star of your Passover meal.

COOKS EMBRACE CHALLENGE OF PASSOVER DESSERTS

BY KIKELY WYGNONIK

Deciding what to serve for dessert is one of the most difficult decisions for cooks planning Passover menus.

"No flour, no cornstarch, no baking soda or baking powder," explained Susan Friedland, author of "The Passover Table: New and Traditional Recipes for Your Seder and the Entire Passover Week" (HarperPerennial; March 15, 1996, \$17). "Baking is definitely a Passover challenge."

"This year, the Jewish Festival of Passover will be observed from sundown on Wednesday, April 3 through sundown on Thursday, April 11. According to the Jewish Community Council, Passover commemorates the liberation of the Jewish people from Egyptian slavery in approximately 1230 B.C., and the resultant exodus from Egypt."

In their haste to leave Egypt, the Israelites did not have time enough to let their dough for bread-baking rise. To this day, unleavened bread is eaten during the eight days of Passover. Certain other foods containing yeast or other leavening agents, such as baking soda and baking powder, are forbidden by Jewish law to be eaten at that time. All leavened products are removed from observant Jewish homes, and matzo (unleavened bread) serve as the staff of life.

The first two nights of Passover

are celebrated in Jewish homes with a feast called the Seder. The word Seder means "order" of the service. It is a ceremonial dinner marked by the retelling of the story of the Exodus from Egypt through the use of prayers, songs and ceremonial foods.

"After the Seder a long and heavy meal, fruit salad and macaroons are a good choice for dessert," said Friedland, a lifelong Passover cook, and one of the most influential cookbook editors in the country. During the rest of the week, cakes are welcome.

When considering dessert choices, Friedland suggests - "If the meal is heavy, keep the dessert light. You can't mix with fruit salad. Use whatever fruits look the freshest. Add dried fruits, grapefruit and oranges. It's nice to add citrus because of the juice."

In her cookbook, Friedland has recipes for a Dried Fruit Compote - "It keeps well and tastes good," she said. "It's delicious for dessert, a snack, or at lunch with yogurt or cottage cheese." She's a big fan of fruits, and uses them to add rich flavor to cakes and other desserts. Her Banana Nut Cake recipe contains three very ripe mashed bananas.

"Watch the restrictions, but don't be afraid to experiment," she said. "You can process a pint of strawberries in a blender or food processor with lemon juice and sugar,

and use it as a dessert topping. Top apple sauce with a meringue."

"People think they can't do really nice desserts for Passover, but they can," said Marcy Feldman of Huntington Woods. "You can't use flour, but you can use matzo cake meal, which is a good substitute. You can be creative, there are dessert recipes that contain no flour. In 1996 there are kosher for Passover substitutes for baking soda and baking powder so you can use more recipes now than you used to. A tradition used to be to have sponge cake because there was no flour, but now there are other things you can adapt. I serve strawberry mousse because it's special."

Preparing for Passover is a lot of work.

"You clean out all your cupboards, if you are very traditional, and put away all your pots and pans, dishes and utensils. Then you bring out your Passover dishes, utensils and cookware. Everything in the cupboards is replaced with kosher for Passover foods. What's so ironic is Passover is the festival of freedom, yet to prepare for this holiday we become slaves. But it's important that we remember that we were once slaves, and to appreciate others, and never treat anyone like a slave, or belittle them in any way."

Feldman cautions cooks preparing for their first Passover to make sure the foods they use are kosher

approved for Passover.

"Since the food at Passover can be described in one word: heavy, it was my mother's custom to serve a light, lemony dessert that tantalized the taste buds and delighted the eye," said Dorie Shwede of Franklin. "I continue to call it Citronne Creme in honor of my German-born parents whose language I learned in childhood. An accurate, though pedestrian translation would be lemon-meringue curd. Yuck! I also serve the Citronne Creme in my mother's crystal dessert dishes, which appear only at my Seder table, against a wine grape cluster embroidered ivory cloth which I bought on my honeymoon in Spain 27 years ago. Thus, I have intertwined my mother's tradition with my own."

"She always made a Porcupine cake that was really a loaf sponge cake layered with luscious chocolate and wine, covered in chocolate and studded with almonds. A dollop of Citronne Creme on this luxurious cake was dangerously close to being excessive. And why not? Sitting in stupefaction (or was it the four cups of wine), pride and satisfaction in having survived this amazingly labor-intensive revived religious odyssey surrounded by family, kicking cousins, grateful friends, I, like my mother, think excessive is just about perfect."

• See recipes inside.

Celebrate Oscar Night

BY KIKELY WYGNONIK

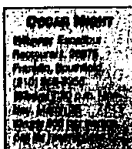
STAFF WRITER

Oscar Night at Excalibur Restaurant in Southfield is the next best thing to being there. "We have a glitzy atmosphere and thought we should do something to celebrate the Academy Awards," said Victor Daxbas, restaurant manager. "It's black tie optional, but 80 to 90 percent come in black tie. We were surprised."

"Actually the idea was conceived by my wife Karen," said restaurant owner Marty Wilk of Farmington Hills. "We rolled out the red carpet and have sky tracing searchlights in front that can be seen in all counties. Many people come in limos."

Oscar Night begins with a five course gourmet dinner. This is Excalibur's fourth Oscar Night, and Wilk and his staff started planning the menu shortly after the Academy Award nominations were announced.

This year we designed the menu with a sense of humor," said Daxbas. "For instance, our 'Sense and Sensibility' Salad - Organic Greens with Hearts of Palm and Alfalfa Sprouts with Meadow Honey and stone ground mustard vinaigrette - has nothing to do with the movie, but it's a heart-



healthy, sensible salad."

Dinner begins with Smoked Scottish Salmon with toast points and garnish to commemorate "Braveheart," and Scallops with Fennel in Parchment Envelope, a special delivery for "The Postman."

"The entire relates to 'Babe,' a comedy based on the children's book, 'Babe, the Gallant Pig.' No one had the heart to include pork or lamb, so they developed a Farmer's Table Medley - Beef Medallion, Roasted Stuffed Veal Loin, Hickory Grilled Chicken Breast and Corn Fritters with Mushroom Sauce."

To launch the night's entertainment a Chocolate Cheese Mousse with Orange Tang and Grand Marnier Sauce will be served.



Oscar Nominees: The Dashwoods enjoy lunch in "Sense and Sensibility."

tuted it for the orange zest in the mousse." This is also the fourth Oscar Night for Chef De Cuisine Vince Bulone who will lead his cast behind the scenes in the kitchen. "It's a great time," he said "We set up a big screen TV and have an Oscar Derby where people can pick their favorites. Prizes are awarded to patrons who make the most correct predictions. Instead of watching the Oscars at home you can come here."

• See recipes inside.