

MONDAY, SEPTEMBER 23, 1996

# TASTE

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## TASTE BUDS



CHEF LARRY JANES

## Measure up for best results in cooking, baking

Recently I baked cookies with my daughter. As we began to measure ingredients, the difference in our techniques was obvious. Jessica dipped the measuring cup into flour and flattened it into the cup with the palm of her hand. I gently corrected her because I wanted her to learn proper measuring techniques to ensure consistent results.

### Proper equipment

Using standard measuring equipment is the first step toward recipe accuracy. Necessary equipment includes glass or clear plastic liquid measuring cups in 1/4- and 1/2-cup sizes; metal or plastic graduated dry measuring cups in 1/4-1/3-1/2- and 1-cup sizes; and a set of measuring spoons in 1 tablespoon and 1/4-1/2- and 1-teaspoon sizes.

In European based cookbooks, many dry ingredients are measured by weight rather than by volume, which is even more accurate. A good, balanced beam scale is the most accurate, but new digital and good spring based scales can be equally effective.

When measuring a small amount of liquid, use the smallest measuring cup available for greatest accuracy. For accuracy in measuring dry ingredients, use the size cup that holds the exact amount called for in the recipe.

### Amounts

If your recipe calls for liquid or dry ingredients in less than cup specified amounts, remember that a dash equals 1/16 of a teaspoon, 3 teaspoons to a tablespoon, 4 tablespoons to a cup and 16 tablespoons (48 teaspoons) to a cup.

Anytime you see a recipe in a cooking magazine, newspaper or cookbook, you can be assured that the recipes are based on level measurements for both liquid and dry ingredients.

To measure liquids correctly, place the cup on a level surface, get eye level with the marking you need to read, then fill the cup to that line.

Now anyone who has seen me know that I tower above the average cook (I'm 6 feet 6 inches tall). When I need to measure a quarter of a cup, I never get down on my hands and knees. I simply open a top cupboard, place the measuring cup at eye level (the second shelf) and measure with impeccable accuracy.

But when I teach a cooking class, the biggest problem I encounter is most people have no idea how to measure dry ingredients. Especially when baking cakes and pastries, exact measurement of dry ingredients is critical, and can make or break a good recipe.

First off, never, under any circumstances, pack dry ingredients into a recipe unless it calls for it. To measure dry ingredients, I suggest you lightly spoon the ingredient into the cup or measuring spoon, allowing it to mound slightly. Then, level the top with a flat edge, such as the back of a butter knife or metal spatula to achieve a smooth surface. The only dry ingredient that always should be packed is brown sugar. It needs to be packed firmly enough so that the sugar keeps the shape of the measuring cup when it's turned out.

Most brands of flour today are pre-sifted, so it's no longer necessary to sift before measuring. I suggest you pay attention to the recipe because some do say that the ingredients should be sifted together or separately.

The biggest mistake people make when measuring flour is they tap the side of the measure or flour canister and this, in turn, packs in the flour. Whenever I open a new bag of flour, or get out the canister, I suggest stirring it to lighten it, then gently spoon it into the dry measure and level it. Again, shaking the cup will pack in the flour and more flour will result in a dryer recipe.

Unfortunately, there are exceptions to the no-sift rule. They include cake flour and powdered sugar which are very soft and tend to pack down during storage. For optimum results, I recommend that you sift; then measure as directed above.

In addition to using the proper measuring tools, measuring can be equally important to diabetics and people on weight control or healthy eating regimens. When dining, I imagine a 3 ounce serving of cooked meat, fish or poultry to be about the size of a deck of playing cards.

When walking through a salad bar, I imagine a tennis ball cut in half to measure out about 1/2 cup of whatever it is I'm taking.

Chef Larry Janes is a free-lance writer. He welcomes your calls and comments. To leave a message for him, dial (313) 953-2047 on a touch-tone phone, mailbox 1886. See recipes inside.

## LOOKING AHEAD

What to watch for in Taste next week:

■ Start your day with breakfast.

A Cinematic  
Feast!

# Big Night

Food has  
become  
one spicy  
theme in  
movies

BY JOHN MONAGHAN  
SPECIAL WRITER

For the Italian-born brothers in "Big Night," serving an authentic meal means more than spaghetti and meatballs, red checkered table cloths, and a fat tenor singing "O Sole Mio."

It's an art which few but themselves appreciate in their tiny restaurant on the Jersey Shore in the 1950s.

Primo, the most passionate of the two brothers, puts it bluntly: "To eat good food is to be close to God."

"Big Night," which opens Friday at the Main Art Theatre in Royal Oak, is not the first to tap into a modern movie audience's love of the culinary arts. The past decade has seen the screen focus more than once on the almost mystical experience of preparing, serving, and eating memorable meals.

Who can forget the scene in "When Harry Met Sally" in which Meg Ryan goes orgasmic over a deli sandwich? Even better is the way Harry's sportswriter friend sums up the modern obsession with food: "Restaurants are to people today what theater was to people in the '60s."

Then there's "Diner," the common ground for friends to talk sports and music over hamburger and fries ("are you done with that?" "Moonstruck" featured Olympia Dukakis' special bread recipe, in which a hidden egg could signal a pregnancy. Less appetizing was David Lynch's "Eraserhead," where Cornish hens proved too animated to eat.

It wasn't until "Tempo," the 1987 hit from Japan, that food and movies blended so deliciously. Hero a Clint Eastwood-style loner rides into town in search of the perfect noodle, eventually opening his own noodle emporium. Most remember it for the kinky lovers who spiced up their lovemaking with sushi and raw eggs.

A year later came "Babette's Feast," a rare Danish release, in which a talented woman, forced to cook mundane dishes for her employer, gets a chance to show her stuff. The result is a meal that has the stuffy diners in a state of magical rapture.

The undisputed king of food movies remains "Like Water for Chocolate," a Mexican import based on the book by Laura Esquivel, and inspired by her family's cooking traditions. The recipes featured in the book also make their way into the film.

Because of family tradition,

Tita must watch true love Pedro marry her older sister. When her teardrops fall into the cake she prepares, everyone at the reception grows uncontrollably depressed. Roses from Pedro, mixed with quail and honey in Tita's recipe, turns a simple meal into a powerful aphrodisiac that has diners, some practically strangers, heading for secluded corners.

A hit with critics and audiences alike, "Like Water for Chocolate" proved that the power of food on celluloid stretched far beyond the art house audience. It boasted the largest box office gross of any foreign film at the time.

Local restaurants have hosted theme nights for both this and "Babette's Feast," preparing the unique recipes.

The new comedy, "Big Night,"



JON CLIFFORD

Dishing up dinner: Stanley Tucci (right) offers Ian Holm one of his culinary delights in "Big Night," the heart-warming story of two immigrant brothers attempting to save their failing restaurant business and attain the American dream.

hopes to bring spiritual aspects of food back to American screens. Written and co-directed by Stanley Tucci (he was a regular last season on TV's "Murder One"), it focuses on a pair of brothers and the importance of doing things right, not pandering to the masses.

The brothers often disagree. Secondo (played by Tucci) would like to make a little money. Older brother Primo (Tony Shalhoub) says he can't compromise. "It's a story of the struggle between commerce and art," Tucci said. "We use the chef as the artist."

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The new comedy, "Big Night,"

When famed Italian-American band leader Louis Prima is supposed to show up, the brothers are elated. The restaurant, months behind in payments to the bank, will bask in the publicity that will come from a celebrity endorsement. Secondo can already picture the autographed photo hanging prominently on his restaurant wall.

Much of the movie involves the preparation of that fated meal, with Primo gathering the freshest ingredients while Secondo takes care of the business details, which include inviting his closest friends and family.

Tucci chose for the banquet's centerpiece a dish known as a "Timpano," specific to the small town in Calabria where his family hails from. Help in the kitchen came from his mother, Joan, who served as unofficial food consultant on the low-budget film.

Named for the "timpani," or kettle drum, the dish is made in and shaped like a large kettle. Consisting of pastry dough and crust on the outside, it is filled with multiple layers of pasta, meats, cheese, and eggs. Once cut open, it unleashes a cornucopia of colors, tastes, and smells.

Since the last third of the film involves eating and drinking at the actual party, Tucci and his food stylists had to keep the meals looking halfway appetizing. "As you can imagine, the set was sweltering we had to keep it cold," Tucci said of the meal, which also included caponata and fried zucchini. "We couldn't use any spices that would discolor it."

Tucci is not surprised at America's current fixation on food, even at the movies. "There's a spirituality, a sexuality, a sensuality that goes along with good food," he said. "Look, we all have to eat so I figure let's make it as pleasant as we can."

## FOOD FOR THOUGHT ON VIDEO

- "Who is Killing the Great Chefs of Europe?" (USA-1978)  
The title says it all in this dated, but still enjoyable, comedy starring George Segal, Jacqueline Bisset, and Robert Morley in his best role ever as the world's greatest gourmet.
- "Eating Raoul" (USA-1982)  
A cannibal comedy from Paul Bartel. He and Mary Woronov lure swingers to their home, kill them, and then serve them as specialties at their popular restaurant.
- "Tempo" (Japan-1988)  
The start of the international food at the movies craze, a hilarious story of one man's search for the perfect noodle dish. Directed by Juno Trani.
- "Babette's Feast" (Denmark-1987)  
A talented chef who has spent her life making bland food for her employer gets the opportunity to cook one great meal. The results are surprising.
- "Eating" (USA-1990)  
The thesis of Henry Jaglom's typically talky comedy is that woman's main interest is not work, family, relationships or sex — it's food. One woman, after a rapturous description of a good meal, calls it "the ultimate safe sex."
- "Fried Green Tomatoes" (USA-1991)  
Based on the Fannie Flagg's novel "Fried Green Tomatoes at the Whistle Stop Restaurant," in which biting into a fresh sample of the title delicacy is tantamount to leaping into life feet-first.
- "Like Water for Chocolate" (Mexico-1992)  
The best of the bunch. Based on the novel by Laura Esquivel, a story of everlasting love and magical recipes set in the early 20th century.
- "Eat Drink Man Woman" (Taiwan-1994)  
In Ang Lee's follow-up to "The Wedding Banquet," a Taipei master chef loses his taste buds and must rely on his daughters to carry on the family tradition.

— John Monaghan

## Beefy burritos are fast family favorites



NATIONAL CATTLEMEN'S BEEF ASSOCIATION  
Quick entree: Combine browned ground beef with prepared salsa and cheese spread to make Beef and Cheese Burritos in 20 minutes.

Want a fast and fabulous Tex-Mex-style burrito that's better — and faster — than the local carry-out restaurant. Make it at home — in 20 minutes!

That's right. Beef and Cheese Burritos can be cooked and served in well under 30 minutes. Team browned ground beef with convenient prepared salsa and cubes of process cheese spread, then heat through. Spoon this tasty, cheesy beef mixture into warm flour tortillas and serve with lettuce, tomato and ripe olives.

Spanish rice from a mix makes an easy accompaniment, and fresh fruit or sherbet provides a cooling counterpoint to end the meal.

Economical ground beef is hard to beat when it comes to versatility and

value.

**BEef and cheese burritos**  
Total preparation and cooking time: 20 minutes  
1 1/2 pounds ground beef  
1 1/4 cups prepared thick and chunky salsa  
1/2 pound pasteurized process cheese spread, cut into cubes  
8 flour tortillas (approximately 8 inches each), warmed  
Toppings:  
Thinly sliced lettuce  
Chopped tomato  
Sliced ripe olives  
In large skillet, brown ground beef over medium-high heat 6 to 8 minutes or until no longer pink. Pour off drippings.  
Stir in salsa and cheese; heat until cheese has melted.  
To serve, spoon approximately 1/2 cup beef mixture in center of each tortilla. Fold bottom edge over filling; fold sides to center, overlapping edges. Serve burritos with toppings. Makes 4 servings.  
Recipe from the National Cattlemen's Beef Association