

Made 'for cooks with a touch of the poet'

Last week I found myself staring blankly into a kitchen cupboard at 6 p.m. Not only was dinner not made, but I had no idea what it was going to be.

This is unusual of me but I had just spent five hours in a futile attempt to convince an obstinate computer to process a program that looked perfectly fine to me. For five hours it just kept sending back messages to the effect of "Loading terminated due to the following errors . . ." followed by a list of errors longer than the original program.

There are nasty names for people who behave like that. It knew perfectly well what I meant.

In any case, the computer had won that round. I was too frustrated and hungry to want to fuss with cooking but dinner. Since many people who work face this situation at least five nights a week, I thought it might be good to devote a series of columns to time-saving hints and quick recipes.

I am rapidly approaching the time, however, when the combined demands of home, school, and work will be too great to allow me the time for a series like that.

AS THE SUMMER winds to a close and the start-up of school comes closer, days which are free for visiting, for reading, or writing seem even more precious.

We spent one of those days recently visiting a very dear friend who has a home near Port Sanilac, relatively isolated, they have a large vegetable garden and have just planted peach, plum, cherry, pear and apple trees.

Her parents live nearby and raise chickens, supplying them with fresh eggs, and they plan to also raise bees for a supply of fresh honey. They barter with neighbors — raspberries for wheat — that kind of thing.

Their toddlers roam free in an unfenced yard. There is nowhere dangerous for them to go. We walked down long country roads, talking. We played a marvelous game of soccer on the huge lawn with players ranging in age from 2 on up. It all seemed so simple, so beautiful.

We left at the end of the day with sacks of fresh vegetables from the garden.

THE NEXT morning I served the zucchini in a new souffle recipe. The recipe said the souffle would serve two and, indeed, two of us polished it off but the portions were farmhand size.

The recipe also mentioned that the souffle might benefit from the addition of some tomato sauce. Since zucchini dishes are sometimes bland, I warmed some fresh tomato sauce. The souffle was so delicious, though, that the sauce was left untouched. It would have been a shame to cover up the wonderful flavor with a sauce.

I am passing on the recipe with some trepidation. Perhaps the special quality of the souffle that morning came from the spirit of the previous day in the country that was so bound up in it. How often does that happen with food? It is delicious or offensive in relation to our moods when we eat or to memories associated with it — intangibles that can never really be passed on when we share a recipe or even repeat a recipe ourselves. Although I can't share that day, I hope you enjoy the souffle recipe on its own merits.

ONE THING I can share is the discovery of a store in Birmingham that is like entering another era. M.T. Hunter (1000 S. Woodward) specializes in Early American reproductions. These are not the mass-produced reproductions that have given early American such a bad name over the past years but handcrafted treasures ranging from hand-rubbed wood hutches and book cases and hand-sewn quilts to hand-dipped candles, calico, aprons, quilted place mats, tin cookie cutters, and reproductions of old cook books.

I was especially taken with a heavy metal, pewter-look muffin tin. (\$6.95) The tin had seven cups of various shapes. Attached was a card with this explanation: "Four Seasons Muffin Tin." The star in the center stand for winter, or Christmas. The two hearts stand for spring or love. Two scalloped circles stand for summer's flowers and foliage. The two plain circles represent the Harvest Moon and the bare trees,

after they shed their autumn leaves."

IT struck me that this would make a lovely gift for a birthday, engagement, an anniversary, Christmas — the symbolism of the four seasons would make it appropriate for so many occasions. The tin could be simply hung on a wall for non-cooks or actually used for muffins by cooks with a touch of the poet or to create whimsically shaped treats for children.

THERE ARE SO many other things I would like to share — new cooking equipment, recipes, books, even mistakes to avoid — but time is short.

In the fall I will be studying accounting and beginning work for an accounting firm. It will be an exciting opportunity for me to be able to have hands-on experience at the same time that I am studying accounting.

At the same time, however, trade-offs are involved. Time constraints will not permit me to continue writing my column and it is something I will miss.

I have already tried to squeeze too much into this last column. I suppose it is like last-minute instructions to a child leaving from camp for the first time.

Some of what is said may be of value, most is probably mere repetition. It just represents an unwillingness to let go.

I should, then, close but would like to thank all of you who have taken the time to read my columns. I wish you and your families pleasant memories from all the four seasons of life.

ZUCCHINI SOUFFLE

1 chunk (1 oz.) chilled Gruyere or Swiss cheese
1 1/4 lbs. zucchini, stem ends removed
1 tsp. salt
Bechamel Sauce, made with 3/4 cup milk
1/4 slice day-old white or whole wheat bread or 1/4 cup dry bread crumbs
4 medium shallots, peeled or 1/4 medium onion, peeled, cut into 1-inch cubes
1 1/2 tsp. olive, vegetable or safflower oil
1 tsp. softened butter
2 eggs, separated, room temperature



Salt and freshly ground pepper
4 egg whites, room temperature
1/4 tsp. cream of tartar

Coarsely grate both the cheese and zucchini. Sprinkle the zucchini with 1 teaspoon salt. Set aside 30 minutes. Squeeze to remove bitter liquid. Rinse salt is removed; squeeze dry.

Meanwhile, prepare Bechamel Sauce; cover with plastic wrap touching top of sauce and set aside at room temperature (or refrigerate overnight).

Place bread, torn into pieces, in the container of a blender or food processor and process to fine crumbs. Set aside. Mince shallots. Transfer to a medium skillet; add oil. Cook over low heat until soft. Add zucchini to skillet and increase heat to medium. Continue cooking, tossing frequently, until all liquid has evaporated. Remove from heat; set aside.

Adjust oven rack to lower position. Heat oven to 400 degrees. Generously butter a 1 1/2-quart souffle dish; dust with bread crumbs and tap out excess. Set dish aside.

Str egg yolks, shredded cheese, and cooled zucchini mixture thoroughly into Bechamel. Season to taste slightly salty and peppery, otherwise souffle will be bland as egg whites dilute taste.

Beat the 6 whites and cream of tartar with a whisk or electric beater in a clean dry bowl until whites just form firm peaks. Fold about 1 cup of the whites thoroughly into the zucchini mixture; then fold slightly zucchini mixture into whites only until no large streaks remain. Spoon into souffle dish;

A Question of Taste

By Hilary Keating Callaghan

smooth top; make a deep X with a knife. Place dish in oven and immediately reduce heat to 375 degrees. Bake 30 to 35 minutes, until puffy and browned. Souffles rise most during last several minutes of baking; take care not to bang oven door. Serve immediately.

Makes 4 appetizer servings; 2 main course servings
(Adapted from "The Art of Food Processor Cooking" by Jane Salzfass Freeman)

BECHAMEL SAUCE

2 tbsp. butter
2 tbsp. flour

3/4 cup milk, scalded
Salt and pepper to taste
Dash nutmeg

Melt 2 tablespoons butter in a 2-quart saucepan. Add flour and stir over medium heat until cooked but not colored, about 2 minutes. Remove from heat and slowly whisk in hot milk.

Return saucepan to low heat and stir until sauce thickens to the consistency of a very light pudding. Add salt, pepper, and nutmeg to taste. Cover with plastic wrap touching top of sauce to prevent a skin from forming. Set aside at room temperature until ready to use.

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